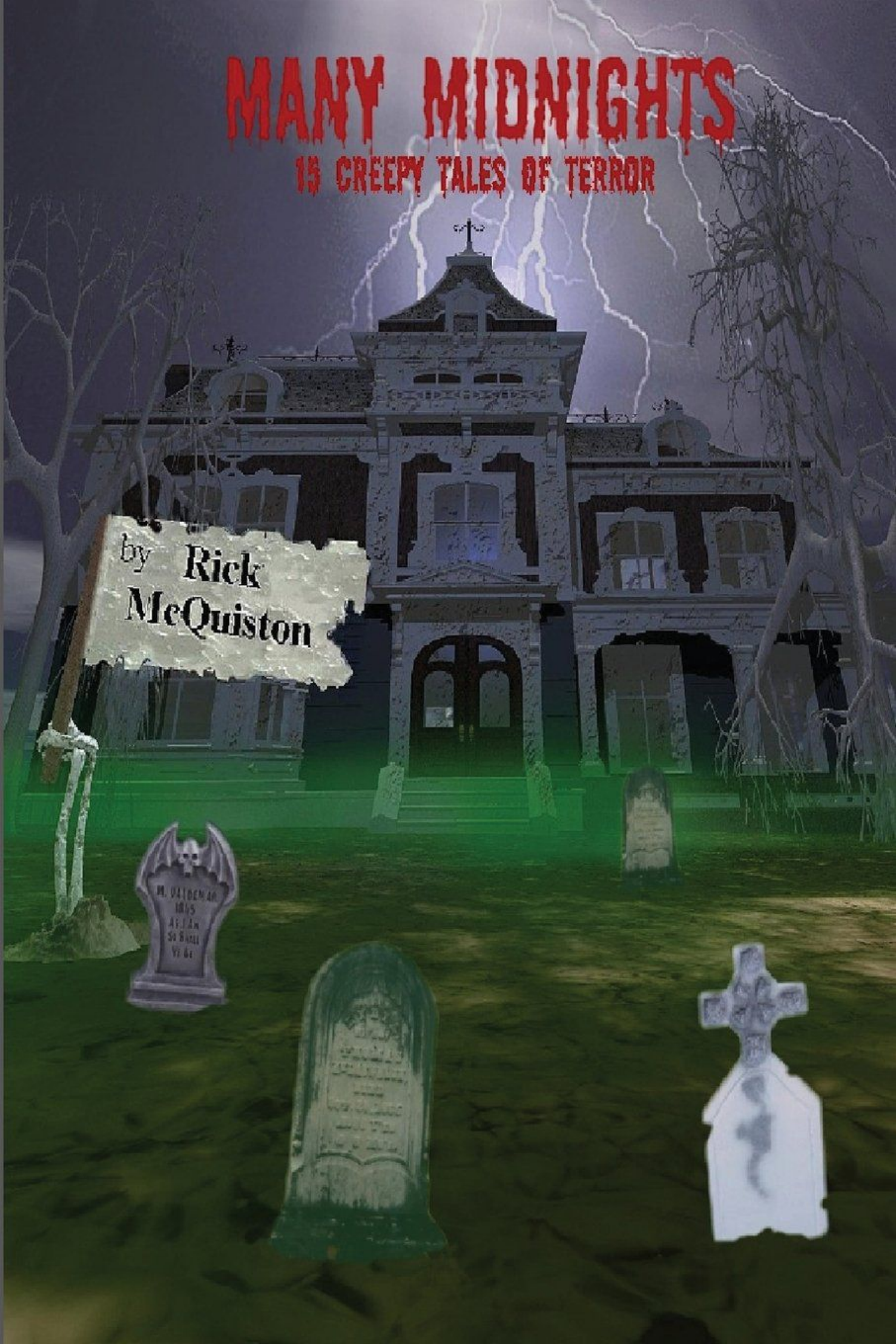
MANY MIDNIGHTS
15 CREEPY TALES OF TERROR
by Rick McQuiston

# MANY MIDNIGHTS

By Rick McQuiston

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**Edited by Rick McQuiston and Rosemary McQuiston.**
**All stories and characters (and monsters) are fictional and the product of the author's imagination.**
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**Visit my website, freewebs.com/terror_tales**
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# Welcome.

**These 13 tales that I proudly present here are the result of years of hard work. I feel that each and every one is a result of a certain 'midnight' in my mind. That is to say an interpretation of something that scares me (and hopefully scares you too).**

**Some of these 'midnights' are from my childhood (A TRIP TO GRANDMA'S HOUSE, MR. HOLE) while others were created from regions in my mind that even I didn't know I possessed (NIGHTMARE, SIMPLY WEIRD).**

**So please, pull up a comfortable chair, light a blood-red candle and enjoy many of my midnights.**

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# A TRIP TO GRANDMA'S HOUSE

**"I dare ya. I double dare ya. What's the matter Spencer, chicken? Bobby Spencer is a chicken!"**

**I wasn't chicken. At least I told myself so.**

**"I got money that says you won't go up to the front door, wipe the dirt off and look inside with a flashlight."**

**"How much." I replied.**

**"Two bucks," Burt said. He was bigger than the rest of us and he was a jerk; he made me glad I was only a visitor to this neighborhood.**

**Not that I didn't like the neighborhood, even though I only came here maybe five or six times a year. The old church we'd pass on the freeway, the monument to war soldiers in the park, the crazy office building that looked flat from the front, as if it would come tumbling down. And of course, Grandma's house.**

**That little white house with the wide driveway and the odd little path around its perimeter. All these landmarks were as much of the visit as Grandma herself.**

**After dinner me and my brother Danny would sit and listen to Grandma's many stories. She would talk about everything from her school days to when she met Grandpa.**

**It was during one of her stories about the nearby streets that she brought up the old empty party store only 500 feet from her front door. It was an old looking building that was always closed.**

**Me and my brother and five or six kids from the block would use it as a base. Timmy Sutton and his brother Joey said that once about two years ago, there was an open sign in the window. None of us believed them though, not even Burt, and he was the one always making up stories.**

**"That place ain't ever been open," he would say.**

**I didn't believe them either at least until that cold, gray Christmas Eve.**
**The car rumbled down the road with Dad at the wheel. We passed all the landmarks**

**and eventually approached Grandma's house. As we passed the old party store, my brother Danny suddenly shouted, "Hey look! The old store is open."**

**Sure enough the closed sign had been replaced with an open sign. Inside I thought I saw someone move. I wasn't sure, but there definitely was someone inside.**

**I found myself anxious to get to Grandma's house so I could hook up with the neighborhood kids and finally see inside the old store. The whole gang was gathered around, although no one dared to go in just yet.**

**"The store's finally open, "Joey Sutton yelled as we approached the corner.**

**"Got five bucks says you won't go inside," Burt challenged.**

**Again all eyes turned towards me. I knew I couldn't back down.**

**The steps leading to the door seemed made of mud. Each felt a mile high. An aged steel storm door loomed within inches of my hand. The door handle felt aged and neglected. A rusty blank sound escaped as the handle turned allowing access to the inner door. It**

**creaked a hollow noise as the interior of the store was revealed to me at last.**

**Surprisingly, the inside was not at all as dirty as I had expected. Four light bulbs hung loosely from thin wires and the cash register sat quietly from its space on the countertop.**

**"Well, hello there young man," the friendly voice said. "How are you today?"A large woman of sixty or so gently walked out.**

**"I'm Grandma Olcher and this is my store, as I`m sure you've guessed. Would you like a candy bar?"**

**My fear of a stranger was soon overruled by a kid's love of chocolate.**

**"Thank you," I replied.**

**As the folds of plastic were removed, the old lady`s eyes were riveted to mine. She seemed to be talking to me through those eyes.**

***It's all right dear. Nothing to fear. Only free candy bars in my odd little store.***

**Then I felt the unpleasant feeling of worms in my hands. Looking down, I saw the candy bar was full of maggots! Literally hundreds of the obscene worms were neatly encased within the chocolate.**

**My screams filled the air only to be mixed with her mocking laughter. I stumbled as I retreated towards the door. The hard polished floor met my palms nearly snapping my wrists.**

**Regaining my senses, I could feel her behind me and turning my head revealed such a terrible sight that I nearly fainted.**

**She was completely upside down, floating six inches above the ground. Her face had elongated in such a way to where her chin was touching her chest. The hair on her head was rapidly growing, no…moving, around her entire body. Occasionally, one would burrow into her skin, only to crawl out again at some nearby point.**

**"It's alright dear," the unchanged voice calmly stated. "I love children. I have something for you."**

**Outstretched arms reached eagerly for me. Where there used to be hands, there were now pulsating mounds of rubbery matter, resembling wet clay. My age permitted me to escape and I was met outside with surprised looks.**

**"We gotta call the police! There's a monster…a witch. Grandma Olcher is a monster!" I screamed.**

**"You're crazy," Burt shouted as the rest of the gang nodded in agreement. Even my own brother didn't believe me.**

**"Bobby, we didn't see or hear nothing. We were all watching from the side window. All we saw was an old lady giving you a candy bar. Then you dropped it and just freaked out."**

**I knew I had to deal with this. I knew what I saw, I wasn't imagining. It happened. I left the corner without another word.**

**When I reached the opposite curb I turned to look back. That was when I saw Burt going in. That was when I noticed a pair of eyes looking at me from one of the rear windows of the store… eyes that were three feet apart from one another. I ran back to Grandma's house.**

**Nearly four months have gone by now. Dr. Tolan says I'm doing much better. He says I imagined it all and I'm beginning to believe him.**

**Dr. Tolan says going back there will be good for me. Says facing the truth is the right thing to do. The truth that it's**

**just an old store with an old lady running it. No monsters, no witches, no fat, upside down ladies with changing faces.**

**They're waiting in the car for me now. We're going to Grandma's for Easter. Part of me is looking forward to it. Looking forward to finishing the hallucination. But I must admit, there's still a small part of me that's scared.**

**As the miles went by, the familiar landmarks came into view.**
**The old church by the freeway, the monument to soldiers, the building that looks flat. We gradually moved past them all as we'd done many times before.**

**Finally, we turned onto Grandmas street and passed the old store. It looked as it had always looked, no lights and dirty and old.**

**The usual group was hanging around by the front of the store like so many times before. They were all there, except for one…Burt Gil.**

**I noticed one last thing before we swerved into Grandmas driveway…a pair of eyes looking at me from one of the rear windows of the store, eyes that were three feet apart from each another. I closed my eyes and sank back into the seat.**

**8**

**9**

# MR. HOLE

**The shock of your history teacher dying in a car accident hits you like a ton of bricks, especially when you really liked him. Mr. Straithen was a good man. Virtually every one of his students liked him, including myself. He would go easy on the homework and usually let his students take the last ten minutes of class off. Yeah, he was a real good guy. Of course I was a history buff to begin with. All those names and dates interested me. Mr. Straithen realized this and encouraged me to do my best. Imagine, me, a fourteen-year-old C average student, easily acing tests and homework. I'll sure miss good ol Mr. Straithen with his pepper colored receding hairline and his deep laugh. Yes, I'll miss him all right as I'm sure many other kids will too.**

**I persuaded my mom to let me take a couple of days off from school. Not for the normal reasons an eighth grade kid would, like girls or going to the beach, but because I needed to grieve for Mr. Straithen. I think she sensed my sincerity and let me stay home.**

## 10

**For two days I stayed in my room and when Thursday came, I was prepared to head back to school. I wondered who would replace Mr. Straithen.**

**"Paul, how ya doin buddy?" It was Carl, my best friend spotting me as I walked to my locker in school.**

**"I'm o.k. Just needed some time to think." I was afraid my grief would show through.**

**"Yeah, that's cool man. What a bummer what happened to Mr. Straithen. I heard it was a messy accident. Hit a pothole of all things, some big hole in the road. Guess he didn't see it in time."**

**Carl had a way with words. Cool...man...bummer...what dialogue. "Do you know who his replacement is?"**

**"Yeah, some fat guy. Weird name too...Mr. Hole."**

**That first day in history class was a killer. I felt uneasy the entire period, as if I were dangling above a pit. The slightest tilt would send me pummeling down into the abyss. I sat through class virtually motionless.**

**The new teacher unnerved me as well. Mr. Hole was a short round man who appeared to be in his fifties. He was dressed rather**

**conservatively in a jet- black suit with a black tie. His oiled hair lay flat on his small head and parted severely to the left. It was at the end of class, as I walked past his desk, that I noticed his eyes. I had thought they were a dark brown, but they seemed to be closer to a dull black. They looked straight through me.**

**"Mr. Tinton," he calmly stated as I tried to scurry past him. "May I see you a minute please?" His expression was lifeless. I slowly turned and stood at the edge of his desk.**

**"Mr. Tinton, you appeared to have been daydreaming in my class today. Can you explain?"**

**"Umm...I didn't realize...I haven't been feeling well lately."**

**He stroked his second chin. "Yes, I understand you are distraught about Mr. Straithen's untimely demise."**

**"Yes sir."**

**"Very well then. I understand. You may go."**

**I seized the opportunity to leave immediately. As I literally sprinted out the door, I glanced back at Mr. Hole. He was gently rubbing his stomach ...as if he'd just finished a meal, strange.**

**During the next few weeks, nothing out of the ordinary happened. History class was**

**gradually becoming bearable and my grades started to pick back up. All in all, my life seemed to be slipping back to normal ...or so I thought.**

**But then May eleventh came. May eleventh was the day three kids in my History class were killed in a freak accident. Joey Silvering, Frank Tills and Sam Wieton. They were riding their bikes out by Alcove Lake. Apparently, they fell into a sinkhole. Fifteen feet straight down onto jagged rocks. Joey and Frank died instantly; Sam made it through surgery, but died of complications shortly afterwards.**

**The suddenness of the tragedy coupled with the bizarre way they died had the entire school in shock. Counselors were brought in to deal with the situation. Although I hardly knew them, I still felt shaken by the incident. A sinkhole? Who ever heard of such a thing?**

**The bell sounded with its usual audacity, allowing the halls to be filled with throngs of students. Mr. Hole sat quietly behind his desk. As I walked by, he stood up abruptly. He looked at me as a hungry man would look at a plate of food.**

**"See you tomorrow, Mr. Tinton," he said as I hurried by.**

**“Y...yes sir,” I managed to reply. Again, I couldn’t help but notice him rubbing his stomach; his right hand gently moving in circular motions like waxing a car. I left the room as quickly as I could.**

**The next two days were a blur. Each hour meshed with the one before it. I found myself entertaining horrific ideas about Mr. Hole. Everything from him murdering children to being a mafia hit man.**

**“Mr. Tinton! What is that on your desk?”**

**I looked down to see that between my hands, one of which still held my pencil, was a cartoonish drawing of Mr. Hole. It was brashly labeled Mr. Hole-in-the-head. It depicted him as a sloppy clown picking his nose. I had no time to realize what was happening because within seconds I was being dragged out to the hallway. He stood me up against a locker, the air vents stabbing my back.**

**“So, you’re an artist? Well, I think this calls for detention.” His dark eyes swelled with satisfaction. “Three o’clock sharp! And no reading material.”**

**“But Mr. Hole,” I pleaded. “I didn’t draw that. Someone’s playing a joke. I never even seen...”**

**“Enough! Three o’clock sharp. Now back to your seat.”**

**I stumbled back to my chair and slumped into it. The remainder of class took years to pass with Mr. Hole looking at me periodically with a cold stare.**

**As three o’clock approached, I felt increasingly sure that something was going to happen in detention. Mr. Hole and I in a classroom alone for an hour...the thought sent a shiver down my spine.**

**“Mr. Tinton. Glad you could make it. Please, have a seat.” His politeness was overshadowed only by his deceptiveness. I quietly took my seat and folded my hands on the desk. He gazed at me with fixed eyes while lightly rubbing his stomach. After several agonizingly long minutes, he spoke. “Mr. Tinton, do you know why you are here?”**

**“Because of the drawing I didn’t do?” My courage surprised even me sometimes.**

**“I know you didn’t do the drawing...I did. That was my way of getting you here. Clever wasn’t it?” His eyes were now starting to darken. Soon they were completely black, void of any pupil whatsoever. Two small black holes where eyes should have been. Fear kept me glued to my seat, that and the fact that he was between me and the door.**

**“What are you?” I managed to ask.**

**“You wouldn’t understand,” he stated calmly.**

**“Try me!”**

**“Very well, Mr. Tinton. Even a small mind such as yours can grasp the properties of holes. Every hole, large or small, deep or shallow, leads to somewhere. Whether a foot deep or miles deep, each one will nonetheless, lead to somewhere.” As he spoke, I was aware of the shades drawing themselves and the windows closing and locking. “Some might lead to knowledge, while others...” he paused, and then started to rub his stomach again.**

**“I’ll scream,” I defiantly announced. He immediately snapped his pudgy fingers and I felt my throat constrict, making it impossible for me to utter a sound.**

**“Do you know what a Black Hole is?” Again, he paused then continued when he remembered he’d severed my vocal chords. “A Black Hole is a collapsed star whose gravity overwhelmed its mass causing it to collapse into itself. Nothing can escape its gravitational pull, not even light...or humans. “**

**He casually walked over to the front of my desk where I sat completely immobile within my seat. Leaning in towards my face, he continued, “When I told you that every hole**

**leads to somewhere Mr. Tinton?" He leaned even closer, his odor filling my nostrils. "That applies to Black Holes as well. There might be one closer to Earth than you think. Close enough to allow me access to this planet." Standing back up, he adjusted his suit and slowly walked back to his desk. After seating himself and straightening his desktop, he looked directly at me. His eyes, or should I say his holes, started to rotate, spinning rapidly within his head.**

**I was transfixed at the horrible display in front of me. The only thing that broke my gaze from his was the new phenomenon exposing itself to me on the floor. A hole. A jet -black hole growing in diameter in front of my desk. In a span of a minute, it had stretched to three feet wide. I could feel the cold emptiness from the opening yearning for me, reaching out for me. But I was unable to move or even scream. I was a lamb waiting for slaughter. Mr. Hole sat placidly not more than ten feet in front of me, oblivious to his creation.**

**Feeling myself being drawn into the hole was a terrible feeling. Being helpless to stop it was even worse. My last sight of Earth was the opening far above me as it grew smaller and smaller.**

## 17

**Eventually, I hit bottom. Where I was or how far I'd fallen was God's guess. I stood up only to bang my head on a metal lid of some sort. Reaching forward, I felt the bars of my cage. I was trapped.**

**"Who is there?" a desperate voice called out. A voice I recognized.**

**"Is that you Mr. Straithen?" I yelled, suddenly aware of my ability to speak again.**

**"Yes," the voice answered back. "I'm trapped in some sort of cage."**

**"I thought you were dead!"**

**"I am dead. This is my soul. He keeps us caged here until he's hungry."**

**I went numb. This can't be happening. This is some sort of bizarre nightmare.**

**"I suspect I'll be next. It's been a while since he last came." Then Mr. Straithen fell silent. I could hear him settle back down into his cage. I did the same.**

**I was awoken by a scream...Mr. Straithen's scream. "Get away from me," he cried as I heard a cage door open. Then...silence. Absolute silence. I clenched my fists as tight as I could, vowing to myself that I'd put up a fight when my time came. I sat back down and fought sleep.**

## 18

*  *  *

**The policeman mumbled to himself as the coroner zipped up the body bag. “Only fourteen years old. Too damn young for a heart attack.”**

**The second officer patted his rookie partner on the back. “ Don’t worry Tom, “ he blandly said, “ you’ll see plenty of this crap before retirement.”**

**After the body was removed and the Police had finished with their questions for him, Mr. Hole sauntered back to his desk. He was tired. He would go to bed early tonight, maybe even skip dinner. After all, he’d already eaten earlier.**

**19**

# FACING YOUR FEARS

**Tara checked her watch, three fifty-one p.m. glared back at her. Confident in the fact that she was early she allowed herself to relax for the first time in days. Dr. Everth was a highly respected psychologist and Tara was certain he was helping her in many ways.**

**She glanced over towards the receptionist's desk. Elizabeth had been Dr. Everth's secretary for as long as she could remember, much longer than she had been a patient and that was quite awhile.**

**Elizabeth was busily typing away at her computer oblivious to Tara. Her gray hair was so tightly packed into a bun that Tara found herself wondering if it actually hurt.**

**"Dr. Everth will see you now," she said in a sterile voice without bothering to look up.**

**Tara mumbled a thank you and gathered her purse and other belongings.**

**She smiled at Elizabeth as she shuffled past her desk and was hardly surprised that she received no response.**

**The heavily varnished oak door swung back to reveal Dr. Everth's spacious office. The entire room abounded with bookshelves, which were packed with tomes of various shapes, sizes and occasionally colors. Tara briefly scanned the volumes out of habit more than curiosity.**

**The walls sported framed diplomas and other accolades and printed sheets of awards and accomplishments. Thick burgundy carpet coated the floor from wall to wall only interrupted by expensive furniture strategically placed throughout the room. And the staple of any psychiatrist's office, the couch, was positioned off in the corner, alone and aware of its importance. In the center of the room was an enormous, highly polished oak desk, which dominated all the other furniture.**

**Tara began to get curious as to where Dr. Everth was. The door to the lavatory was open but the lights were off and there was no sign of him anywhere.**

**She sat down in one of the two chairs in front of the desk and did her best to relax.**

**Random thoughts of the creature that inhabited her nightmares roamed freely across her mind. It was a sickening thing with numerous eyes and skin that was nearly transparent and coated with slime whose sole purpose was to plague her dreams and force her to seek therapy. Its form was as vague as the dreams it inhabited, but it still possessed the power to alter her sanity and slither into the deepest depths of her mind.**

**Tara shuddered as the unwelcome recollections infested her head. Why she suffered from these nightmares she did not know but she knew that Dr. Everth was helping her understand the meaning of them and that was the first step to recovery.**

**"Tara my dear, good to see you again." The words startled her causing her to nearly fall out of her chair.**

**Dr. Everth was a frail looking man in his early seventies. His small stature was a direct and prominent contrast to his intellectual and professional abilities,**

**which he had consistently displayed to his numerous patients.**

**He possessed an uncanny ability to tap into her thoughts, analyze the problem and prescribe a definitive course of treatment. He had helped her to overcome the miscarriage she had suffered and actually use it as a tool to help her to fully appreciate her self worth. He showed her that her relationship with her perfectionist mother, God rest her soul, could be used as a stepping -stone to peace of mind.**

**"Dr. Everth," she timidly replied. "I…I didn't see you come in. I just sat down and…"**

**"Now Tara, there's no need to explain. You are right on time. I apologize for being a little late myself." He adjusted his silk tie and seated himself behind his desk. "Now, shall we begin?"**

**Tara opened herself up completely as she had done so many times before. She explained her most recent episodes to him going into great detail about everything from her preparation for sleep to what she ate for dinner. Dr. Everth sat patiently through it all occasionally nodding and frequently scribbling notes**

**in his small leather bound ledger. When she had finished she took a deep breath and waited for Dr. Everth's response. She felt nervous, which surprised her simply due to the number of times she had paid visits to him but she still could not deny or suppress the butterflies in her stomach.**

**"Well Tara, I dare say I'm impressed with your grasp of the situation." He rubbed his graying stubble and smiled at her. "You have come a long way since I first started treating you, but I still foresee a long road ahead of us." He flicked his stainless steel lighter, which instantly produced a thin plume of flame and dipped it towards his mahogany pipe.**

**Tara hated the smoke. It gave her a headache and made her eyes burn. She was surprised he didn't respect her feelings on the matter, even if he was in his own office.**

**"I recommend we explore your past relationships to ascertain if the creature that haunts your dreams is in some way related to any, or all for that matter, previous people in your life." He looked her in the eye and continued. "The old saying about having to face your fears is**

**basically a true one. I use the technique myself in certain cases."**

**Tara felt relieved. Dr. Everth knew what she needed as he had proved so many times before. She would readily submit to his suggestions for treatment and begin her road to recovery.**

**"Yes Dr. Everth. Where would you like me to start?"**

**"Excellent!" he beamed. "Excellent!"**

**He stood up and tapped his pipe into a circular marble ashtray. "Please, make yourself comfortable." He gestured towards the plush velvet lined couch that occupied the wall behind where Tara was sitting. She stood up and gathered her belongings.**

**"Now Tara my dear, you must remember you still have a long way to go until complete recovery. But I do feel that we have already made some progress today. Soon we should be able to discover the underlying causes of the nightmares.**

**"I need to know what it is and why it's in my dreams," Tara said urgently.**

**"Yes, yes I know you do. Rest assured, with more treatment we will find answers."**

**Forty- five minutes later Tara rose up from the couch. She felt substantially better, almost renewed in some way. "Thank you Doctor," she said.**

**Dr. Everth stood also and set down his notebook and pen. "I recommend several more appointments. You can see Elizabeth on your way out. I look forward to seeing you again. Good day."**

**Tara left the office with Dr. Everth's encouraging words filling her head. She scheduled her next appointment with the secretary and walked out the door feeling liberated from at least part of her problems.**

**Dr. Everth sauntered back to his desk, sat down and began glancing over scattered papers that lay in front of him. The rest of his day was free, no other patients at all.**

**"Elizabeth, would you come in please."**

**Elizabeth entered the office and stood in front of Dr. Everth.**

**"Yes sir?"**

**Dr. Everth stood up and smiled at his long time employee.**

**"Elizabeth, I just want to compliment you on another fine job."**

**Elizabeth smiled.**

**"I must say you did very well with Tara. You really affected her."**

**"Thank you doctor."**

**"You are very welcome. After all, you help keep business going."**

**He walked over to one of the bookshelves, reached up and selected a large black volume. He tilted it forward slightly which caused a portion of a neighboring wall to creak open. Reaching inside he withdrew a small partially decomposed cat, which he promptly tossed into the now gaping maw of Elizabeth who greedily sucked it down.**

**"There, there my pet," Dr. Everth cooed. "You see how fine work is rewarded."**

**Elizabeth slurped up the last remaining maggots from the carcass and grinned at the doctor. "Thank you," she slurred as her mouth was shrinking back to normal size.**

**Seating himself behind his desk Dr. Everth rummaged through his agenda.**

**"Now Elizabeth, the remainder of the day is open. I want you to visit Jessica Berfent again. Remember her? She's the one tormented by the memory of her dead**

**husband, I believe his name was Thomas. Can you do him again?"**

**Elizabeth closed her eyes and instantly transformed into a perfect imitation of Thomas Berfent.**

**"Excellent! But he's been dead now for quite a while. You might want to add a little more decay. Perfect! Now I want you to infest her dreams tonight."**

**Elizabeth quickly reverted back to her human form and nodded at Dr. Everth. "I guarantee she will be scheduling an appointment soon doctor," she assured.**

**Dr. Everth grinned. "Excellent!" he beamed. "Excellent!"**

# NIGHTMARE

**Neil hadn't slept in three days. His eyes bulged, swollen and sore from the lack of rest and his joints ached as they never had before. His unkempt appearance was starting to frighten everyone he encountered.**

**His girlfriend had already left him and what thin trace of a normal life that was left to him dangled on a fragile string, a string far too vulnerable to outside elements such as fear and depression.**

**His apartment reflected all the conventional signs of a downtrodden individual who was balancing on a tightrope above a chasm of despair. On the other end of the rope lay the future, full of promise and opportunity. Behind him lay the past, infested with episodes of loneliness and worry.**

**Most people invariably work their way towards the future. They plan for it, save for it, strive for it. They make attempts to restrain it by assigning**

**numerous duties to it, by planning to fill it with activity and accomplishments.**

**But not him. He had great difficulty looking at the future…partly because he did not see that he had one.**

**His dreams always held him back. They forced him to remain perched on the tightrope and occasionally shook the wire as if trying to knock him off into the abyss below.**

**His reason attempted to stave off the dreams, to filter them through a mesh of common sense and logic revealing only reality and peace of mind. But the nature of the dreams would usually rule out any chance at normalcy in his life. They would usually win the constant battle over his sanity.**

**He couldn't really recall exactly when the dreams started. Trying to pin a precise time or even take a reasonable guess was like marking where a horizon began or ended. But he did realize with startling clarity one ominous fact about the dreams…they were all the same. Or at least they all began the same way.**

**The dream would start with him walking in some city minding his own business. Which city it was he could never**

**be sure but the sidewalk that he was on always ran closely parallel to rows of huge buildings. Some were dozens of stories high while others were no more than small retail shops. He never could read any of the signs, which appeared as faded and blurred caricatures of names and addresses.**

**His fear of heights seemed to be magnified by the stone and glass structures, which glared down at him like an adolescent boy gazing at a tadpole in a pond.**

**The scene as a whole had a bizarre feel to it, almost like he was in a Dali painting; twisted and deformed but in a somewhat relaxed way.**

**Doing his best to avoid looking up, he would continue on his way, shuffling along the ever increasing cracks and holes on the sidewalk and focusing his mind on other matters.**

**Up ahead, the street sign would come into view. He could never make out what it said due to the faded condition of the letters and the overall bad condition of the sign.**

**He would look up to see that the sun had just finished setting, leaving the**

**streets vulnerable to the impending night. It would tighten its grip on the city rapidly, increasing the aura of fear, which surrounded him and drained his desire to move on.**

**And then he would hear it. The same sound every time since he was a kid…the sound of a woman being attacked. Her attractive voice was reduced to howls of pain and pleas for mercy. She was being assaulted down a dark alleyway on his left. Her cries were always accented by various noises of cans clanking and boxes being trampled.**

**He was sure there was only one man with the girl and this no doubt gave him the courage to investigate.**

**Even though his recollection of previous dreams warned him not to venture into the alley he nevertheless felt compelled to help the poor woman any way he could. His moral beliefs were too strong to ignore. His mother had always imparted her strong religious faith to him, which included her generous nature and her willingness to assist others in need no matter what the situation. He would feel responsible to some degree to intervene where he could. He would call**

**out to the girl in his deepest and most intimidating voice. It never worked but he always tried it nonetheless.**

**After a brief pause followed by feet shuffling, the attack on the girl would continue and he would be forced to move.**

**The alley would be dark, wet and stink of garbage. Various boxes, papers and discarded food containers would litter the ground, each a miniature breeding ground for filth. He would hesitate at the entrance, unsure of his ability to face the situation but nevertheless ready to confront the cause of it.**

**And then he would halt dead in his tracks as the silhouettes of the girl and her attacker would stop at that point…together.**

**They would look in his direction…together.**

**They would melt into each other, forming one grotesque abomination that would smoothly and effortlessly begin to flow towards him. He would still be able to hear the girl's voice, although it would be distorted into a raspy drawl that seemed to be mocking him.**

**He would be frozen to the spot where he stood.**

**Why he would not be able to move, especially with such horror approaching, he was not sure. Perhaps because one cannot always control one's actions in dreams. Or maybe because his subconscious was forcing him to face his fears and overcome them. Or maybe he was just too scared to move. He usually conceded that it was a combination of all three, although the last reason was probably more responsible than the first two.**

**And then he would find himself in his bed or on the couch or at a friend's house or wherever he happened to have fallen asleep. The recollections of the dreams would be sharp and vivid, spurring disorientation in him about the difference between fantasy and reality.**

**He hadn't slept in three days. The ever-present hand of exhaustion loomed over him like a cold winter day.**

**He hadn't slept in three days. But he knew that eventually, inevitably, fatigue would win and catapult him back into the realm of dreams whether he wanted it to or not.**

**But one thought gave him enough encouragement to continue to fight sleep…his memory of the last dream he'd had; it was three nights ago.**

**He shuddered when he thought of the disturbing fact that each subsequent dream he had, the thing in the alley had gotten closer to him before he would wake up. The last one he had, it was right in front of him. He knew the next time he dreamed, it would surely get to him.**

**He poured himself his eleventh cup of coffee and turned up the volume on the television as loud as it would go…and waited.**

# SIMPLY WEIRD

**Debbie knew Rick's room would be bad but nothing prepared her for this. It was cluttered beyond belief. Dirty clothes lay on top of three or four layers of other dirty clothes, completely blotting out the floor. Underwear, jockstraps, socks, jeans, winter jackets…Yes! even winter jackets, despite it being June! Filthy dishes with remnants of moldy food lay perched in almost strategic positions around the room. She recognized a few of them from dinners she had hastily prepared before jetting out the door to go to her endless meetings and other professional obligations.**

**Two jobs did have a habit of consuming most of one's free time, leaving her precious few opportunities to spend with her only child.**

**Being a single mother never seemed to wear her down though. She accepted her situation with as much responsibility as she could. But when Jonathon left, she found it very difficult to carry on. Ricky kept her going. It was for him that she**

**managed to overcome the blow that life had dealt her.**

**Money was always tight so she had been forced to get a second job. But Rick was sixteen years old now and was able to drive himself to school and work, which helped quite a bit. She still fought depression though due mainly to the unmistakable rifts in her relationship with her son.**

**Friends dismissed it as typical behavior from a teenage boy towards his mother, but she felt otherwise. She tried as much as she could to connect with him and to understand his problems, but he seemed distant nonetheless. His grades were still solid and as far as she could tell he avoided drugs and alcohol, but she just couldn't seem to reach him completely.**

**His friends, Mike, Paul and Brian weren't bad kids, just a little strange. They weren't very friendly or talkative and they usually just quickly shuffled into Rick's bedroom and locked the door behind them. Debbie felt ashamed of it but more than once she put her ear to the door. She would have left it at that if she had heard talking through the door about which girls were the best looking or which**

**band had the best guitar player but every single time she eavesdropped she heard the same thing. Every time her son and his friends locked themselves in his room for hours on end she heard the same exact thing…absolute dead silence. No talking, no music, no shuffling around the room. Nothing. Quiet as a cemetery.**

**To say that this worried or even frightened her would have been an understatement. Eventually she had to confront him about it.**

**"Mom, don't worry about it," he said in a dull voice. "We're not doing drugs or anything, we're just…"**

**She hated to push the subject but she did feel somewhat gratified that she finally had time to look after her child.**

**"But you guys don't make a sound in there," she said. "I don't want to pry because I respect your privacy, but…"**

**"Mom, we like …meditate. It clears our minds."**

**Debbie knew she was walking a thin line. One mistake and she would end up pushing him further away.**

**"Okay fine. Just don't keep anything from me alright?" She reached for him and pulled him close.**

**"Please…okay?" A tear rolled down her cheek as she tightened her arms around him.**

**"Sure mom. Sure thing."**

**She gradually slid back into her busy life. Two jobs accented by cleaning the house as much as she could again left little time for her son. Rick hardly seemed to notice though; he was either at school, work or in his room. So when she finally found the time to tackle his room she knew it would be a big job. He was out with his friends and he told her it would be okay if she cleaned the place up.**

**Her foot sank into the clothes up to her shin. Maintaining her balance proved to be quite difficult and she had to hold on to the bedpost to avoid falling. But where should she start? The clothes on the floor? The dirty dishes? The stacks of books and papers on the bed? How did he live in a room like this? Did she really do such a bad job raising him?**

**Eventually she decided to start with the clothes. Each step felt reminiscent of quicksand. An article of clothing blotted out every square inch of the floor. Gloves, shoes, baseball caps, sweaters. A small chuckle escaped her lips when she**

realized that some of it she had never even seen him wear.

She started to rehearse in her mind the lecture she was going to give Rick when he got home. She was not going to tolerate a room in her house like this. Three more steps and she neared the center of the room, each one being hindered by the mass of clothes at her feet. Anger started to fester in her. This was absolutely unacceptable. She knew she was partly to blame, but its not like it was her choice to work so much. Jonathon walking out on her and Rick was not in her master plan.

With her mind preoccupied, she hardly noticed that her feet were slowly sinking into the clothes. In a few minutes, both feet were submerged past the ankles. Panic gripped her like a vice when she suddenly realized that she could not move. The brand new spray bottle of Shine On cleaner slipped from her hand and landed with a soft thud on the clothes. She watched in disbelief as the bright yellow bottle steadily sank until completely out of sight.

The impossibility of what she had just witnessed hit her like a knife in the

**stomach. But no time for that now because she realized that she was standing in the same area. Very carefully, she attempted to lift her right foot while keeping a firm grip on the bedpost. It felt like lifting one's leg out of wet cement, thick and heavy.**

**She almost fainted when she saw her foot covered with a thin, nearly transparent slime, which felt slightly warm and gave off an odor not unlike carrion. She screamed as loud as she could. Not because of being stuck or because of the slime, which was now beginning to hurt her feet. She screamed because of the slender, blood red tentacle, which was slithering towards her through the clothes.**

**Resembling a snake swimming through water searching for prey, it obviously sensed where she stood. Though it had no eyes, it reacted to every breath she took.**

**Her stomach was threatening to empty itself as she watched it move, silently pushing aside a sneaker, a Yankees baseball cap, a dirty white t-shirt, its tip anxiously twitching back and forth.**

**Self-preservation finally overtook fear and she managed to dislodge her left foot from the clothes and make her way back to the doorway. Four feet seemed like a mile and she thanked God she hadn't shut the door behind her when she came into the room.**

**But the nightmare progressed. Several more tentacles emerged from the clothes, each identical to the first one. They writhed in every direction, occasionally bumping into one another, each one searching, feeling its way to where she stood.**

**The doorjamb felt good in her hand, but it still proved very difficult for her to pull herself out of the clothes. The pain in her feet was increasing from the slime and the smell was starting to make her dizzy. But the thought of passing out and falling into the clutches of the tentacles spurred her on. With newfound strength she managed to free both feet and get out of the room.**

**It was just in time.**

**Catching her breath, she looked back behind her. Where the tentacles came from was revealing itself.**

**The clothes lifted, exposing the glistening blob underneath. The tentacles were merely grotesque feelers, sensing and locating prey for the creature. She backed away from the room as the feelers swung back and forth in the air, obviously still sensing prey nearby.**

**A cold chill overcame her. She nearly stumbled but managed to brace herself against the wall. The thing under the clothes shook violently and sank back out of sight leaving behind a sickening odor and many future nightmares for Debbie.**

**The sound of the front door opening was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard. Rick casually strolled in holding a can of soda and a notebook.**

**"Mom?" He seemed surprised to see her, an observation that disturbed Debbie. She frantically searched for a reply but only answered with incoherent stuttering.**

**"What's the matter?" His eyes appeared empty, soulless.**

**Debbie managed to catch her breath**

**"Something in the…the…your room. Tried to grab me… tentacles, the smell."**

**Rick sighed deeply as if he thought his mother was having hallucinations. He began to usher her down the hallway towards his room.**

**"No! No!" she pleaded, trying to turn around.**

**"Its all right mom," Rick said in a soft, indulging voice. "I just want you to show me what's the matter." But his eyes betrayed his words. They drilled into Debbie's with a cold malevolence.**

**The room looked just as it did before. Same messy room with no sight of the floor, same dirty dishes scattered around.**

**"But there …there was something. A big …thing. The clothes, it swam in the clothes. I…I don't understand."**

**Rick's eyebrows rose. "I know mom," he stated in a lifeless tone. "You see, I first found Slug, that's my name for him, about six months ago. He was no bigger than a baseball but he grew real fast once I got him into my room where he was safe."**

**Debbie couldn't believe her ears. "It's your …pet?"**

**"Yeah. I guess you could say that. The guys have one too, although theirs are smaller."**

**As he spoke, he was casually nudging Debbie closer towards the doorway.**

**"They're from some asteroid in something called the Oort Cloud. Supposed to be way past Pluto."**

**He now had Debbie up to the entranceway of the room.**

**"They feed on insanity. That's why they chose Earth. Everything here is organized, logical, everything makes sense. They need that type of place to feed and to grow." Each word stung like a scorpion. "When they're big enough they can start to alter reality. Slug's already started. The clothes, he made them like water. And sound…that was his first try. He sucked the sound right out of the room, although in certain circumstances he allows speech. "**

**Nightmares don't get this bad, Debbie thought to herself. The strain of it all was starting to wear her down; she struggled to maintain her sanity.**

**"You should see the stuff that Ron's pet has done. Made everything in his room inverted. Turned everything inside out, even his dog. Messy as hell. Talk about crazy!"**

**Both her feet were in the clothes now. She could feel the tentacles wind and slither around her ankles, each tightening on its prey.**

**"I can't wait to see what he's gonna do this time." Rick's eyes glowed with anticipation and excitement. "This one should be good…he hasn't eaten in a while."**

**Rick slammed the door shut behind them. Debbie screamed and screamed as loud as she could, but no one would be able to hear her…for the room was completely silent.**

# 2 + 2 = 5

**Hugh Mahorn scribbled the equation on the chalkboard. 2 + 2 = in big, bold white numbers. He always made sure to write very large so his students in the rear of the classroom could see the chalkboard clearly. When he finished, he glanced over the problems to ensure that he didn't miss any.**

**His age was beginning to affect and even hinder his ability to teach, but he had promised himself when he was in college that he would do it until his dying day. He loved teaching, he had all his life, and after twenty-seven years he was not about to let an occasional slipping of the mind affect his professional destiny. His father had encouraged him, at least when he was around, to set a goal and strive continually to meet that goal and when that goal was met, then set another one even higher, and so on and so on.**

**But it had always seemed somewhat hypocritical to him that his father was never around when he needed him. He had always wondered if that fact was the reason he was so driven in the pursuit of**

**his career. He never wanted any of the children in his classes to feel like they did not have someone in their life that would be there for them and that was a promise he would always keep both to himself and to his students.**

**Satisfied with the problems on the board, he whirled around to face his class. Thirty-one small expressions greeted him, each a reflection of its owner's personality. Samuel Toffer boasted perfect white teeth in his ever-present grin. Jessica Alleau's pigtails framed her pale face giving her a look of innocence unparalleled by any other student he had ever taught. Little Billy Burrett was the smartest dresser in the class, wearing pressed cream-colored slacks and a bright red dress shirt. He always seemed indifferent to Hugh's lessons as if he already knew the answers but simply did not wish to reveal them. But he was a bright student, never absent and always well behaved.**

**Virtually all of the children in his classes were good kids. There were some bad apples occasionally but they were few and far between and even they had some good qualities to them. He had learned**

**over the course of his career to balance discipline and leniency and the results usually, if not always, were generally positive.**

**"Mr. Fischer, would you please address the problems on the board?" More often than not he did not like to put the students on the spot but Timothy Fischer was slipping lately on his homework and he did not want to have a conference with his parents. He had always considered that to be a last alternative. After all, that would look bad on him as well as the student.**

**"Yes sir," Timothy quickly replied.**

**"5 – 2 = 3, 7 + 6 = 13, 4 + 8 is…umm…12 …"**

***Excellent*, Hugh thought to himself as he took a seat behind his well-organized desk.**

**"9 – 6 = 3, 7 – 2 is …5 …"**

***Yes, very good. Perhaps little Timothy would improve after all.***

**"And 2 + 2 = 5."**

**"Very good, now I want you to …Excuse me? What was your answer for the last problem again?"**

**Timothy was about to sit back down but immediately stood back up.**

**" 5," he answered confidently.**

**"The last answer is incorrect. 2 + 2 = 4, not 5." Hugh abruptly stood up from his desk and began to stretch his aching fingers. The puzzled looks the students shot at him made him uneasy in his classroom for the first time in twenty-seven years.**

**Several small hands raised into the air almost instantly. Timothy spoke up first, his voice laced with sincerity. "Mr. Mahorn, the last answer was right, 2 + 2 = 5." The other children all nodded in agreement.**

**"Mr. Fischer, I think I know proper mathematics." Again looks of bewilderment filled the room. "Now if you would open your Science logs to section four."**

**Agatha Veril, all forty pounds of her, suddenly blurted out, "Mr. Mahorn! Mr. Mahorn! See, he was right!"**

**Hugh looked up from the papers he was straightening. She was rather excited, much like an explorer making a great discovery.**

**"Excuse me?"**

**"See, 2 + 2 = 5!" She struggled to hold up the thick Math book with her tiny arms.**

**Hugh leaned forward and examined the page she was pointing to.**
**His eyes nearly fell out of his head when he saw the equation of 2 + 2 = and under it, upside down at the bottom of the page was the number 5 for that problem.**

**"What's the meaning of this?" he exclaimed to the startled children. He snatched the book from little Agatha who was now somewhat frightened of her teacher. A closer examination only verified what he feared…2 + 2 = 5.**
**His teacher's edition yielded the same results, as did three other students' books.**

**He had to remain calm. A typo? Possibly, but in all the books? And why did the students think it was correct?**

**"Ms. Lucido, may I see you for a moment please?"**

**The young history teacher from across the hallway smiled and excused herself from her class.**

**"Yes Mr. Mahorn?"**

**"Please, call me Hugh." Even though he was old enough to be her father he still secretly harbored a crush on the shapely, blonde woman.**

**"Hugh, what can I help you with?" Her soft smile sliced into his heart.**

**"This may sound odd…but could you answer a simple question for me?" He hoped he wouldn't sound too stupid. "What is 2 + 2?"**

**She looked at him like he was an alien from another world.**

**"Pardon me?" Her baby blue eyes expanded.**

**"I know, I know, but please just humor me."**

**"Well…2 + 2 = 5."**

**If the look on her face weren't dead serious, he would have broken out laughing. He watched as she walked back into her classroom and continued with her lessons. Stumbling back to his own room he heard something that sounded even stranger than the math equation…Ms. Lucido's well educated and attractive voice telling her student's historical dates.**

**“That’s correct Michael, 1493, Christopher Columbi.”**

**And another.**

**“JFK, 1964…correct. Who can tell me by whom? Nathan. Very good. Lee Harvey Oswath.”**

**And yet another.**

**“The Revolutionary War was against whom? Sarah. Yes, that’s correct. China, and when did it take place? Yes, 1795 thru 1802. Very good.”**

**Hugh felt his head grow light.**

**“There must be some kind of mistake,” he muttered to the floor. “There has to be some logical explanation.”**

**He walked back to his classroom and fell into his chair. The students were staring at him, some in fear and others in pity but all in confusion as to why their teacher was behaving so strangely. Was this reality? 1493? Lee Harvey Oswath? China for heaven’s sake! He took a deep breath and straightened his tie. He had to maintain his composure. Agatha Veril was the first to speak up.**

**“Mr. Mahorn, are you feeling okay?”**

**A simple and sincere question, which would have received a simple and sincere answer, had the voice that asked it sounded like Agatha's normal voice instead of a deep, raspy voice that was**

**unmistakably full of hatred and evil.**

**"Mr. Mahorn? I said…are…you...feeling…okay!"**

**Her face remained unchanged. The same smooth auburn hair framing the small freckled face and baby blue eyes were still there. But the voice, it belonged to a serial killer or a lunatic locked away in an insane asylum, not to the little girl who had told him only a few weeks earlier about the new kitten she had received for her birthday.**

**The other children stared at him, oblivious to their classmate's anomaly. Of course, more than half of them were sporting their own abnormalities. Such as Blake Trenswell's elongated face which bared oversized, serrated teeth or little Samantha Witt's arms that were flailing so high above her pigtails that pieces of ceiling tile were crashing down onto her desk which was pulsating and glowing a**

**deep shade of red and something close to a light blue.**

**"Mr. Mahorn?" It was Billy Barnett, the blood that was literally pouring from his nose and ears meshing perfectly with his red t-shirt. "Are we still going to have a test tomorrow?" His face had grown chalk white due to the incredible loss of blood which had pooled into a huge crimson puddle at his feet.**

**Hugh swallowed hard. "Ummm…we…ahhh…I mean, I don't think…"**

**He shakily rose to his feet, knocking over his desk organizer and a large stack of ungraded papers. They crashed to the floor and promptly grew various legs and appendages resembling heads before rapidly scurrying away in all directions like deformed spiders.**

**"I…I have to go now," Hugh stuttered.**

**He actually feared the children now, his own class! "I'm not feeling well." He grabbed his coat and threw it over his shoulder before realizing that it no longer resembled his coat. It now looked like some type of octopod thing, which writhed in his hands. It made a loud thud**

**as it slopped to the floor. As he stepped over it, it snapped at him with several glistening mouths.**

**The doorway loomed before him, the same doorway that he had passed through countless times before but from which now he was extremely uneasy to walk through. It stood before him, inviting him to attempt to go through it. He weighed his few options and decided that barreling through the doorway was preferable to facing the children in the classroom. Taking a deep breath and gritting his teeth he ran through the doorway as fast as he could.**

**The teeth slightly grazed his arms and shoulders, tearing some clothing away along with some skin. He had to force himself not to look back and see what he had narrowly escaped through.**

**He knew he had to rely on his survival instincts if he was going to make it out of the building. He had always been good under pressure due mainly to his ability to fully access the situation and seek out rational and secure options; however this was by no means a rational situation and he knew very well that his safety was by no means secure.**

**The hallway looked normal enough, to his great relief, and he started to sprint down it. He was careful not to look into other classrooms. His ears hurt from the various inhuman noises emanating from the rooms and he did not want to afflict that type of torture on his eyes.**

**The hallway seemed a mile long. Fluorescent light fixtures swayed back and forth, casting an angry reddish glow over the walls, which were noisily moving inwards towards each other. Within seconds, he was able to touch the walls on either side of him as he hurried down the hall. He had to make it to the main hall in the center of the school. Once there, he would be able to see what the extent of the 'infection' was and plan out his options for escape.**

**The walls clamped shut tightly behind him just as he reached the end of the hallway. There now remained nothing but a thin seam where the hallway had been only seconds before. He tried not to think about what had happened to the people back in the rooms.**

**He had to get a grip on himself. Twenty-seven years of educating had planted a certain amount of wisdom and**

**common sense in him, but he knew that it would be at odds with what was happening all around him. This type of stuff just doesn't happen. He closed his eyes and took several deep breaths all the while constantly aware of his surroundings.**

**"Hugh!"**

**It was Mr. Watherton, the school janitor.**

**"Did I or did I not warn everyone about this?" His eyes blazed and his normally greased back hair stood straight up giving him the appearance of an animated lunatic.**

**"It's finally happening…just like I said it would. See, I told you, I told you what would happen. See."**

**Hugh took a cautious step towards him.**

**"What do you mean?" he asked while looking around carefully.**

**Watherton's wiry arms flung high into the air.**

**"What the hell have I been saying all along," he screamed. "Bout reality and unreality. Bout sanity and insanity. Bout good and evil, black and white, light and darkness…up and down…in and out."**

**His usually pale face now resembled a ripe tomato.**

**Hugh did his best to compose himself.**

**"Do you mean all those crazy things you've been talking about over the years?"**

**"Do ya think I was just nuts or something?"**

**Hugh bit his lip. "Well…"**

**Watherton let out a high-pitched laugh.**

**"Look around you Mahorn, do ya still think I'm crazy?"**

**Hugh felt a migraine coming on. Now was definitely not a good time for a headache, although that would be the least of his worries.**

**His attentions were distracted by a sharp, stinging on his left ankle. Looking down he saw a new dimension of insanity…a small blob of pitch-blackness, which was squirming near his foot. Occasionally it sent out a pitch-black tendril to jab his ankle. The incredible cold associated with it was beyond description. He kicked it away and it spun backwards before splattering against a far wall.**

**“It’s gonna get a lot worse too,” Mr. Watherton added in a distinct ‘I told you so’ tone. “Just wait and see.”And with that he turned and started to stroll down the hall.**

**“It’s like the sun,” he bellowed to the ceiling “Sanity and insanity are kept in balance…just like the sun with its gravity. Eventually one will win out and overtake the other. Too bad it’s the wrong one. Too bad it’s the one we don’t want. Too bad…too bad…”**

**Hugh watched him walk slowly away as he sprouted thick gray fur from head to toe. His head elongated to the point where it flopped to the floor, and when it did so, it burst open with incredible force, spewing forth thousands of slime covered worms that quickly covered the polished tiles.**

**Hugh started to run when the worms began to crawl towards him rapidly, leaving sickly brown trails of slime behind them. What was once Mr. Watherton was now something that Hugh could not even begin to describe much less look at.**

**Turning around, he noticed that the front doors were starting to shrink. The same front doors that he walked through without a second thought countless times before. He would have to hurry if he wanted to make it through them. What he would do when he made it to the outside world, he didn't know. He didn't even know if this nightmare had reached the outside world yet, but he would deal with that when he had to. Right now, getting through the doors was first.**

**Mr. Watherton was now lumbering towards him, reaching out with huge, hairy appendages, reaching out eagerly, hungrily. Hugh did not want to imagine what it would be like to be caught in those.**

**He literally flew across the floor, nearly tripping over a black thing that was rolling out of the main office. An unusual thought flitted across Hugh's mind…could that be Mr. Hadds, the Principal?**

**He made it through the doors just as they closed up. Hugh stood there, catching his breath and trying to think about what to do next. Call the Police? No, they'd never believe him. Get his**

**camera to get some evidence? Wait! Why would he need to do that? Anyone could see what was happening. All they had to do was go to the school.**

**And then his thoughts were interrupted by heavy breathing directly behind him… low, inhuman breathing. He didn't look back, he just ran with all his strength to his car, which thankfully sat quietly where he had left it that morning.**

**The Pontiac rumbled to life and Hugh wasted little time in connecting the gas pedal to the floor. But where was he to go? The Police. Even if they didn't believe him he had to still try, he had to try to warn them, he had to do his duty as a civilian.**

**Any thoughts of getting help from the Police were quickly dismissed when he drove up to the Police station. The entire three- story building was pulsating as if it was some type of creature eating a meal. As he rolled by the front doors the building stopped its chewing motion and locked a concrete, steel and glass stare directly on him. Hugh slammed the gas pedal to the floor. In his rear view mirror he saw three policemen stumble out of the**

**front doors of the building and immediately be snatched back inside by a huge greenish tongue that shot out with lightning speed.**

**Hugh found himself having to reach deep inside to control his emotions. Fear, anger, confusion, they all vied for center stage in his mind. Fear of what would become of the world. Anger that God could have allowed something like this to happen. Confusion about how this could happen at all.**

**If only his father were here now. He could make up for years of absence with one appearance. His strong leadership would surely help Hugh find a rational and successful course to take. But that was only wishful thinking, for his father was long gone and hoping for guidance from above, whether it was from his father or God himself, was proving impossible to do in the face of such horrors. But what mattered now was getting control of the situation and reaching his house. At least there he could gather his senses and figure what to do next.**

**The remainder of the drive home seemed somewhat normal. Most people were either unaware of any change in reality or were dealing with it in their own ways. He saw one man working on his car until the hood snapped shut on top of him, slicing him neatly into two pieces. Another man was walking his dog only to morph into some type of dog himself. Hugh had to suppress a laugh when the dog changed into a human and began walking the man!**

**The Pontiac swung hard into the driveway leaving two black marks on the cracked concrete. Hugh jammed the car into park and switched the ignition off. He shakily got out of the car and shut the door…only there was no sound. Complete silence other than a few chirping birds overhead flying under pink clouds. But there was something strange about the clouds other than their unusual color; they seemed to sense the movement of the birds below them. Hugh watched in disbelief as they swiftly swooped down and engulfed the startled birds in one quick motion. Hugh didn't waste any time, he was inside his front door inside of five seconds just as the clouds, now an**

**angry deep red color, began to dive down in a deadly arc to grasp at the new larger prey.**

**Inside the sanctuary of his house, Hugh raced to his bedroom where he kept his gun. He generally was against firearms but a burglar several years earlier left him with a scar on his leg and a new perspective on self-defense. He loaded the pistol and built a small mountain of furniture against the front door and windows.**

**Satisfied with the barricades, he settled into his worn but faithful couch, clutching the gun tightly and waiting for any sign of trouble.**

**Sleep eventually overtook him and despite what he had gone through he slid into a deep and peaceful slumber.**

**When he awoke some time later all was still. It had grown dark outside so he flipped on a small antique lamp that lay on the floor next to the couch. Still gripping the pistol tightly, he looked around the house. Shadows accented the walls but all seemed to be in order; except for the mess he had created barricading the house. He carefully cleared the front door and walked out onto his front porch.**

**Brilliant points of light filled the night sky. He couldn't remember being so happy to see a clear starry night. Crickets chirped their music and the light buzz from a nearby street light further put his mind at ease.**

**But he had to be careful. As he had learned, things weren't always what they seemed to be. He fetched his flashlight and scanned the surrounding area. Everything appeared normal. His Pontiac sat quietly in the driveway right where he had left it and he heard a dog bark from down the street. Eventually he felt secure enough to head back into the house. He needed a cup of tea, badly. He also needed to make a phone call. Anyone would do, just to make sure there were still humans in the world.**

**His Aunt Jenny sounded as she always did, shrill and energetic and Sorento Pizza was ready to take his order with no questions. He switched on some contemporary jazz music, kicked off his shoes and sipped the hot tea.**

**As his mind began its recovery back to normalcy he noticed something lying on his desk in the far corner of the room.**

**There, amid various papers and pencils sat a small, silver finished calculator. Its buttons were worn by the many times he had used it to balance his checkbook or double check an equation. Slowly, cautiously, he walked over to the desk. He hit the clear button to activate it and steadied himself with several deep breaths.**

**Finally, he leaned forward and punched the buttons on the calculator.**

**2…+…2**

**He hesitated, thinking about how his mother attempted to fill the void when his father was not around for him. Strange thoughts to be thinking after what he had, apparently, been through but he couldn't help it. Sometimes his mind just drifted to important but misplaced thoughts.**

**Now all he had to do was hit the = button.**

**Another deep breath. He thought about how comical it was that a tiny button on a ten-dollar calculator held such power over him.**

**Then he pushed it …=**

**He found his eyes had instinctively shut tight and he had to force himself to**

**open them and look at the display on the calculator. A wide smile formed on his face as the display clearly showed the number 4. He rubbed his eyes to make sure it wasn't a mistake. A 4 glared back at him.**

**He happily sighed relief and strolled back to his couch. He'd have to clean up the mess he'd made but that didn't bother him. All that mattered was that things were back to normal.**

**Perhaps it was just a dream or a hallucination. Or maybe it did happen but was cleared up now. Maybe God had simply been testing humanity's limits. Or perhaps the Almighty had wanted to test the faith of just one man.**

**Hugh ran his fingers through his disheveled hair. He made a promise to himself to seek therapy but was nonetheless pleased at how he had handled the entire situation. He slowly straightened the room back up. Furniture was put back into place and the floor was swept and soon it resembled his somewhat lonely but comfortable life.**

**When he was finished cleaning up he made himself a sandwich and walked into his bedroom. Behind him, on the**

**desk, sat the ten-dollar, silver finished calculator with worn buttons. On its display, appeared the number 5.**

# A MONSTER STORY

**Joey cringed when he looked at the closet door and noticed it was slightly open. Any other night he kept it open, a proven method to ward off any monsters that might be lurking inside. But not this time. This time he deliberately closed it, he was sure of it. He had closed it right after brushing his teeth and before turning out the lights. But there it was as plain as the nose on his face a mere ten feet from his bed and threatening to unleash a truckload of nightmares. He pulled his thick, white cotton blanket up to his chin, comforted by its warmth. Caressing the long thin tear along the silk trim, a result of one night when it got caught on one of his toys, he felt relief. Sometimes even small things can mean a lot.**

**The night-light sprayed its glow across the room. But did he really need it? He didn't know anybody else his age that used one and felt guilty for even having one. But he had to admit it did**

**serve a purpose. It made it very difficult for any monsters to hide anywhere.**

**There were so few spots that managed to avoid the light. Satisfaction filled his mind. He'd done a fine job placing the night-light in just the right location. He'd even maneuvered some of his stuff so that the light got pretty much everywhere.**

**His attention swung back to the closet. Maybe he only thought he had closed it.**

**The movement on the floor near his dresser caught his eye. Was it a monster? Some multi-legged creature roaming around for little boys under their covers? No, it was just a spider, a big one but harmless nonetheless.**

**Joey sighed in relief and gripped his blanket a little tighter.**

**The scraping sound filled the room. It was sporadic but unnerving just the same. Joey's eyes darted to the source of the noise…the window. There, just outside, were long deformed fingers, grazing the glass in a frantic effort to get in. He watched in horror as they increased their movements, violently smacking against the thin pane of glass.**

**Would the window hold? He could only hope and pray that it would.**

**But wait! It wasn't a hungry monster trying to break in; it was only a tree swaying in the wind outside of the window. Relief washed over him as he hugged his blanket even tighter. He wanted to call out to Dana, his babysitter, to rescue him or to at least to make sure there wasn't anything there. Then he could finally get some sleep. And then almost as if she had heard him Dana pushed the door open.**

**"You all right?" she asked lazily, a bright pink cell phone wedged between her shoulder and her ear.**

**Joey peeked out from under his blanket. "I'm…I'm fine," he mumbled.**

**"Good, now get to sleep," Dana snapped back and promptly shut the door behind her.**

**Joey had never liked her. She was strict and demanding, a strong contrast to the previous babysitter. He sat up in bed and pushed his blanket off. "Jenny was a better sitter," he thought out loud. She would let him stay up late.**

**And then he noticed the red eyes in the far corner of the room looking at him.**

**They moved from side to side as if whatever it was was making its way towards the bed. Panic seized him and held his body in its paralyzing grip. He couldn't move, a sitting duck in a pond rimmed with hunters.**

**It was coming closer now, although slowly, and it was becoming painfully obvious that the bed was its destination. He held his breath and sat perfectly still, hoping that the thing on the floor would not see him.**

**And then the night-light cast its glow upon it.**

**It was only one of his toy robots. Somehow he must have left it switched on. He leaped from the bed still clutching his blanket and snatched the toy from the floor. He looked at the blank expression on its face as he switched it off. Now he would feel safe and secure at last.**

**He turned and faced his bed. It was the same as it had always been but for some reason it frightened him. Maybe because he'd heard too many stories about monsters hiding underneath beds, lurking in the darkness until some kid came too near and then…bam! Yanked to their death.**

**But what choice did he have? He didn't want Dana to know he was scared, not that she would do anything about it, and the thought that he was scared of his own bed frustrated him as well. He knew he had to climb into the bed.**

**A quick scan underneath it revealed nothing but pitch darkness so he wrapped himself up tight in his blanket and in one swift motion leaped up into his bed.**

**His attention immediately focused on his closet door again; it was still cracked open. Terrible, far- fetched explanations for the door being open ran through his mind. Was a killer hiding inside the closet and he simply forgot to shut the door behind him? Or maybe some alien monster slithered out of the closet and into the room not caring if the door was left open. He pulled the covers up to his eyes and watched the door for any sign of movement.**

**After ten minutes had passed with nothing happening he decided it would be best to completely open the closet door, just to make sure nothing was hiding inside. He jumped out of bed, ran to the closet, swung the door wide open and leaped back into bed with the covers over**

**his head. It took him a few minutes to work up the courage to look but eventually he lowered his blanket. Fortunately, the night-light provided enough light for him to see inside the closet.**

**On one side hung his clothes. Various sweaters, jerseys and t-shirts were lined up in somewhat neat rows. On the other side boxes, which contained his baseball cards and other sports memorabilia were stacked on top of one another. A few jackets and baseball caps were scattered on the top shelves along with various toys and other odds and ends. Nothing appeared to be out of place and most importantly, there were no monsters hiding inside. Finally feeling relaxed enough to go to sleep he took a deep breath and sank back into his bed.**

**But before he closed his eyes something caught his attention. A small otherwise common detail that normally would not merit a second thought. He sat upright and rubbed his eyes as if to verify what he saw was really there.**

**It was.**

**There, lying on the floor of the closet partially hidden by shadows, was a**

**white cotton blanket. He began to wonder if he owned two such blankets, hoping to find an explanation. But that thought was dismissed when he noticed the blanket in the closet had a long, thin tear along the silk trim…just like his blanket had. He sat in bed, too stunned to move and growing increasingly aware of his situation.**

**The thing on his bed began to creep up towards his face, paralyzing as it went, preparing its prey for the kill. He opened his mouth to scream but it covered him in an instant.**

*** * ***

**Dana opened the bedroom door slowly. Not because she didn't want to disturb the little brat but because one of her favorite shows was coming on and she didn't want to be bothered.**

**The hallway light spilled into the room. Dana tucked her pink cell phone into her pocket and looked over at the bed. A small lump lay under the blanket and shifted slightly as she watched.**

**"Good, he's asleep," she mumbled to herself. "Now I can watch my show in peace." But then as she was closing the door something caught her eye.**

***That's strange;*** **she thought.** ***I thought his blanket was white, not red.***

# THE SHAPE OF COLOR

**Blake noticed it first which seemed fitting since he was the foremost authority in the neighborhood on healthy grass. Only Jack Tameron next door could rival him for a showcase lawn.**

**He stared at the deep green patch in the middle of his front lawn trying mightily to wish it away. Normally he would have been thrilled to have such a lovely shade of green on his property; it would have meshed in nicely with the remainder of his lawn. But this seemed strange somehow, almost unnatural in not only its shade but also its texture. The blades appeared to be more course than the surrounding grass.**

**He removed his worn Detroit Tigers cap and scratched his receding hairline. A problem with his sublime lawn was not what he needed at this time. His job was in jeopardy because they were restructuring the plant, laying off workers left and right in their endless desire for more profits regardless of the consequences.**

**The area was small, about the size of a basketball, and distinct in its contours. If one looked at it long enough one could make out the outline of a wolf's head, complete with sharp ears and snout. But it also could be construed as a simple geometric shape of various angles and points.**

**Blake stood there on his porch, gazing his helpless stupidity at the unusual and downright absurd malady that was defacing his plush green carpet of grass.**

**Was it grubs? No, grubs would cause the grass to die.**

**A fungus perhaps? Probably not. He'd had the lawn sprayed twice this month alone. Bernie, his contact man at GG Sod and Sons, had given it a clean bill of health.**

**He pondered the possible causes. Maybe it was some type of Crabgrass or Nut Sedge or even Foxtail, he couldn't be sure. Perhaps it was a combination of problems. Who knows? The all- natural, slow- release fertilizer he paid for was supposed to take care of any potential**

**problems including insects and disease. His blood pressure began to rise when he remembered what it had cost him. He stomped back into the house with steam coming out of his ears.**

**"Bernie? Yeah this is Blake Soufern." He knew he must restrain himself, Bernie was a fine technician and an all- around nice guy, and he didn't want to jeopardize a solid professional relationship due to his temper.**

**"Not so well I'm afraid. I'm having a problem with my front lawn. There's a spot on it that's a different color than the rest of the grass." He hesitated for a moment. "Well…spot might be the wrong word." The correct word eluded him like a galloping zebra just out of reach from a hungry lion.**

**"Discoloration, yeah, it's darker than the rest of the sod."**

**He listened intently as Bernie rattled out a host of possibilities none of which seemed to correctly address the situation. Finally, they agreed upon Bernie stopping by to look at the problem the next day.**

**Blake felt relieved, but was unable to relax. He walked back to the porch and**

**focused his attention on his lawn. The spot was still there but it appeared slightly larger than before. Its perimeters were now nearly as large as an office desk and the shade was undeniably deeper.**

**Blake spewed a concoction of obscenities and immediately glanced around to make sure no one had heard him. After he was satisfied his outburst went unnoticed he approached the lawn. The razor sharp edging job he'd done the day before still stood at attention in perfect vertical lines. The quality of his work almost distracted him but the abnormality in his grass demanded his awareness. He wanted to venture out into the green sea but reminded himself of his number one rule…no one on the grass except to cut it or to treat it.**

**He stood at the border of the lawn staring at his new and frustrating problem with distain. The thought that he would have to wait until the following day before anything would be done was nearly unbearable, but what could he do? He sauntered back into the house to attempt to get his mind off his lawn.**

*  *  *

**The dim light illuminated the face of the clock just enough to reveal the time. Blake rubbed his eyes and rolled over to face the timepiece. The minute hand was between the ten and the eleven and the hour hand rested slightly past the five.**

**Five fifty a.m.! Just what he needed, insomnia. It was still dark outside although the sun was just beginning to rise in the horizon. Birds were chirping their morning songs and an annoying dog was barking from a nearby backyard. Blake had given up on trying to fall back to sleep and instead sat up and pulled on his slippers and robe. He was still tired and even his caffeine craving hadn't started yet but he crawled out of bed regardless, anxious to inspect his front lawn.**

**His surprise was matched only by his joy. The flashlight beam, in conjunction with the porch light, offered enough illumination for him to see that the dark spot was completely gone! Only**

**a smooth layer of evenly colored green grass was visible.**

**He contented himself with a far-fetched explanation concerning some type of new fungus that had somehow evaporated during the course of the cool, damp night, although he did suspect a combination of too much thatch and weeds, possibly Chickweed or Clover. He flicked his light off and strolled back into the house.**

**The screen door clicked into place behind him. Early morning shadows created by the rising sun splashed against the front door temporarily dulling its gloss and darkening the smooth, mauve finish. The dark area in the lower corner by the hinges was not touched by any shadow however. It was considerably darker than the rest of the door and vaguely resembled a misshapen dog's head.**

**Blake felt much better when he reached his third cup of coffee. The warm, caramel colored liquid sloshed back and forth in the faded blue cup. It wafted its strong aroma up into the room, enticing Blake all the more to partake of its contents. He settled down in his**

**favorite chair in the living room and reached over for his morning paper, forgetting that he did not bring it in with him when he came back into the house. The inconvenience of having to get back up gnawed on his good mood but he forced himself to shrug it off and retrieved his paper.**

**The sun was spilling its warm rays through the front bay window casting shadows all about the room. Blake was totally immersed in his newspaper, grunting in disgust occasionally when he scanned an article about a killing or the rising cost of gasoline.**

**He did not notice the dark spot on the carpet near the front door.**

**It resembled a stain from a spilled cup of grape juice…but it was not. It appeared more like something deliberate in its shape, almost organic in some way.**

**Blake finished reading his paper and reclined back in his chair. The possibilities of the day's activities swam in his head.**

**Golf? Maybe, but it might rain. Fishing? No, his tackle box was a mess. Pull the sixty-six Lincoln out and put a coat of wax on it? Yes, that would do. He**

**leaned all the way back in the recliner and began to slip into a light sleep.**

**The strange feeling stirred him to consciencettt His arm felt like it was in a vise, both contracting and expanding simultaneously, a seemingly impossible contrast of sensations. He sat up and pushed his robe sleeve back. The dark spot on his arm was pulsating grotesquely, feeding on its host's body fluids. Blake screamed as loud as he could and tumbled onto the floor. He wildly scratched at his arm but to no avail, it was like trying to rub off a tattoo. He drew blood, which was immediately sucked up by the stain as it squirmed in some type of alien excitement. Oblivious to the suffering of its victim, it began to spread towards Blake's torso in an attempt to extract greater quantities of nourishment.**

**Blake felt his head grow light and the room started to spin. Passing out was the last thing he wanted to do but he couldn't help it. And then darkness overtook him.**

*  *  *

**Jack Tameron sipped his cup of lemon-ginseng tea as he surveyed his front lawn. A smooth sheet of lush green grass stared back at him. A smile formed on his face, one that was full of pride and confidence. His lawn was as nice as his neighbor's. The six- application spray program he'd signed up for was already paying dividends. He looked over at Blake's lawn. It was nice as well, as nice as his if not better, but he would take the crown soon, he was sure of it.**

**And then something caught his eye. Something that should not have been there but was nonetheless… a dark stain on his driveway near his Volvo. He was certain he didn't get any oil on the cement when he changed it the day before but the stain was there, there was no doubt about it.**

# THE BOXES

**Lee glanced nervously at his watch. It displayed five thirty-two p.m. He took a deep breath followed by another and yet another. Had to relax, he thought out loud. Must clear the mind; cleanse it of distractions and complications. Only a clear mind could cope with the delicate and vital situation he was now in.**

**He wondered where Danny, Bruce and Sherry were. If only he could contact them somehow, find out if they were alright. See if they were as nervous as he was. Part of him hoped they were, misery does love company after all, even in a situation as important as this one.**

**Sherry's silky voice echoed in his head. It sung like a nightingale, flowing smoothly between verses which were almost hypnotic in their beauty. She was calling his name, saying she loved him and didn't want Bruce or any other. Was he imagining it or did she really love him? Probably only his nervous mind toying with him. If she really did love him she had plenty of opportunities to show it.**

**His thoughts snapped back to attention. Distractions, complications, he must focus on the job at hand. Surely the others were doing the same. He pictured Danny with his sandy blonde hair jutting straight up like some punk rocker. He envisioned Bruce, his tanned and muscled body flexing with anticipation underneath the army fatigues he always wore. Then he thought of Sherry. Her smooth, tanned complexion and piercing yet soft eyes wrapped around him like a blanket. She was a petite thing, small and feminine almost to the point of being frail but in an attractive way.**

**Too many years had passed between them with little or no showing of affection other than the brotherly love type which was not acceptable to him. Random memories of them rolled through his head, each vying for recognition. The time he first saw her wear makeup, the games they'd play in Danny's basement, the trips up north to her parent's cottage. They all were ringed with true affection, far beyond mere infatuation.**

**Distractions again! More complications attempting to divert his concentration from his mission.**

**Five forty-seven. The time stuck to his brain like velcro. Not much time left now he thought out loud eliciting more than a few stares from passerbys including a stocky blonde haired security guard who seemed to dislike troublemakers in the mall. Lee straightened up immediately and smiled weakly at the guard. He couldn't risk any problems now, not when it would be six o'clock in thirteen more minutes.**

**After the guard walked past him, Lee decided it was time to bring out the box. Sweat trickled down his forehead as he reached inside his coat and gently pulled out the center of his universe…a small silver container trimmed with gleaming gemstones.**

**At its center was a pentagram composed of a dark red substance which resembled dried blood which contrasted strikingly with the overall polished look of the box. As a whole it was a very attractive antique, probably priceless to wealthy artifact collectors and**

**archeologists. But he knew its true worth, its real purpose.**

**Six o'clock, November 14, 2004. It didn't matter which part of the world or what time zone as long as it was six o'clock, November 14, 2004 somewhere. That seemingly common day and time which, unbeknownst to mankind, would be judgment day…Armageddon…Ragnorak…Holocaust…whatever one wished to call it.**

**Admittingly, he was unsure of the whole thing. He never did have an interest in religion, much less Satanism, and as far as he knew neither did Danny, Bruce or Sherry. Sherry… even her name cut through his heart like a blow torch. Distractions again! He vowed to himself to concentrate even harder on his destiny. It wasn't until Danny had found his box, the last one to do so, that the dreams started. All four of them began receiving their strange images which they eventually interpreted as instructions.**

**Each of them was to transport their box to an assigned location on the aforementioned day. His was Friarwood Mall in Cleveland. He was lucky, he at least got to stay in the U.S. Danny had to**

**go to Brazil, Bruce was somewhere in Germany and Sherry was in Australia, near Sydney he believed.**

**The boxes provided them with adequate cash, passports and even plane tickets to allow them a quick and easy passage to their destinations. It was all too easy. Their parents were the only ones who would miss them right away and by the time they realized they were gone it would be too late to do anything about it anyways. It was the boxes that showed them what their real destinies were and how to fulfill them.**

**Lee glanced at his watch, five fifty-eight. Two more minutes. His head swam with images of glory and fame. Their names would go down in history as saviors, messiahs…as gods. The boxes promised them this and much, much more.**

**He wondered if Sherry was uncomfortable in Australia. It had to be hot and dry there. He knew she didn't like hot weather and hoped she didn't give up and turn herself in. As for Germany and Brazil, he didn't know what the weather was like, nor did he**

**care, Bruce and Danny could handle themselves well.**

**A wry smile formed on his face. Surely their parents had noticed that he and the others were gone by now. They probably had the local police searching for them, but it wouldn't be in time for now it was half past five fifty-nine. Only thirty seconds to go.**

**Quickly, he fumbled in his coat for his pocketknife. The small but sharp blade gleamed in the fluorescent lighting in the mall. Trying his best to be inconspicuous, he covered it with his left hand then quickly glanced around to make sure no one saw the knife. Satisfied, he plunged it deeply into the palm of his left hand. The burning pain nearly caused him to pass out but he bit his lip hard and managed to stay conscious while stifling the intense urge to scream.**

**"Oh my God," the elderly woman said. "What happened? Are you alright young man?"**

**Her genuine concern for a complete stranger touched Lee's heart but he suppressed the feeling and quickly looked away from her.**

**Only ten seconds left, he had to hurry now. He slammed his hand down hard on top of the box. The blood seeped out around the edges and dripped down its sides, eventually coating the box completely in a crimson sheen.**

**"Thy might will be done. Oh see the plate of the world at thy feet, scourge of God. Taketh what thy need fallen one. Mouthat silg stha deccos."**

**His watch was stopped dead at six o'clock. He felt the box grow cold beneath his throbbing hand as a strange substance began to ooze slowly and methodically from it. It resembled pea soup, although much thicker and speckled generously with bulbous lumps that looked like bloodshot eyes. The nauseous stench that emanated from it was like decayed flesh. It filled his nose and burned his eyes.**

**Lee yanked his hand away and pushed the box off his lap. He jumped up as fast as he could and started to sprint down the walkway. But it was too late. The substance was spreading like wildfire, coating everything in sight. It engulfed the old lady who had inquired about his hand in less than a second and**

**enveloped dozens of shoppers who were passing the early evening in the mall.**

**Moving up the walls of the nearby stores, it insured everything had a sickening coat of green and even blotted out the skylights above. Screams began to fill the air only to be silenced immediately afterwards.**

**Lee was held fast by the substance, completely at its mercy. It was rapidly crawling up his legs producing intense, burning pain as it did so.**

**"My God," he screamed, fully aware that it wouldn't help." What have I done?"**

**And before he could utter another word…he went under. His final thought was hope that the others had somehow failed in their missions, although he knew it wouldn't make a difference.**

# THE SPIDER

**The spider was perfectly motionless. During its short life it had managed to perfect the art of concealment and camouflage, which were necessary attributes for its survival. Its prey was intelligent and usually quite adept at eluding the spider's grasp, and the spider knew this all too well. Many times it had lost a potential meal, too many for its liking.**

**Vague assemblages of memories floated about in the spider's tiny, fragile brain, occasionally converging to form a coherent collage of past events capable of recognition and even in some cases reflection.**

**The thought of its last meal, a rather plump housefly that fought valiantly right up until the moment of injection, strayed across the spider's mind. It had apparently become injured while flying into a small window. Obviously it had thought it was an open pathway to greener pastures. But that had been quite a while ago. Too many midnights had passed since that fly had**

succumbed to the spider's venom. Pangs of hunger relentlessly tapped into the spider's mind, attempting to shatter its delicate grip on life. The strange sensations it had been experiencing had also reasserted themselves, further adding to the spider's discomfort. The beakers of liquid it had stumbled across in the back room of the house had hardly proved to be an adequate quencher of its thirst, a fact that the spider was becoming all too familiar with. It had thought they had contained water but it quickly discovered that that was far from the truth. Still, the fluids were intoxicating almost to the point of being addictive, and although its thirst and hunger were still raging, it did feel somewhat rejuvenated.

The spider recalled others like itself in the back room as well. Some were large and hairy and others were small, but all were housed inside various sized bottles with wide labels attached to them.

Black Widow (Latrodectus mactans), Northern Funnel Web (Atrax robustus) and Brazilian Wanderer (Phoneutria nigriventer) were but a few of the specimens inside the room. The spider also noticed several small mice in

**glass boxes on the tables. It could not reach them however because they were surrounded by much equipment.**

**The spider's stomach began to contort. The cat it had swallowed had been digested and it now had all of its eyes focused on the family dog. It was a large dog, much bigger than the cat, but the spider did not care, hunger directed its actions. It pounced on the poor creature in a flash and greedily sucked down the corpse.**

**The spider was surprised that its hunger still was not satisfied. It wondered in its mutating and rapidly expanding brain exactly what it had drank in the back room in the house. The complex neurotoxin dripping from its expanding fangs occasionally dribbled onto its own legs causing necrotic lesions; but it did not care, the pain was minimal compared to its hunger.**

**The spider was barely able to squeeze through the doorway but finally managed to do it. It sensed food nearby and an obstacle like a wall or a door was not about to stop it. It entered the room and quickly squatted behind a large couch, attempting to hide itself. But it was**

**no good, it was far too big. So instead it opted for a swift, violent attack instead of a slow, calculated one.**

**The little girl sat in front of the television unaware that she was being watched. She was singing along to her favorite program while eating the ham sandwich her mother had made for her. She was also looking forward to that evening when her daddy had promised her he would play tea party with her. He was always so busy in his laboratory that he usually didn't have much time for her or her mommy but she knew the work he was doing was very important and that it would save lives one day.**

**The spider's fangs drooled in anticipation. It watched the little girl closely, waiting for the opportunity to strike. The hunger it was feeling was maddening, prohibiting the spider from applying patience to its hunt. It knew it would have to attack soon…very soon.**

**The little girl's mother strolled into the living room to see if her daughter wanted something else to eat. She screamed when she saw the half eaten ham sandwich lying in front of the television…covered in blood.**

*  *  *

**The cockroach squeezed through the tiny hole in the wall. It was hungry and desperately needed to find food. The room was very strange; there were many containers with spiders in them and small mice in glass cages as well. It entered the room cautiously, being driven by its desire for food. The thirst it suffered from was also strong, and it was pleased to find some glass containers with liquid in them. It scurried over to them it began to lap up the water.**

**And then it realized it was not water.**

# THE DEMON SMILES

**"Why do we wanna go there?" Tommy asked while looking at the girls for support. Jesse and Kara, each a picture of self doubt and caution returned their concerned friend's look. Kenny spoke up.**

**"Because we're not supposed to." His red hair matched the intensity in his eyes. "Haven't you guys ever wanted to be bad…I mean really, really bad?" He caught sight of a beetle, a small brown thing crawling on his brand new Nike shoes. It left a tiny trail of dirt particles in its wake across the bright blue surface of the leather. He reached down and promptly ended its life between his fingers.**

**The girls looked at each other. They had been very close for nearly all of their twelve years and trusted one another completely. What one wanted to do the other wanted to do, what one thought the other thought.**

**"Fine, we'll go but you boys go first," they said in unison.**

**Tommy, who was still frightened from a horror movie he had watched on Sir Graves Ghastly the night before, reluctantly agreed. Peer pressure had a firm grip on him, as it did on most children, and it directed his actions despite his common sense.**

**"Good," Kenny said. "Tommy, you and me will go first. Girls, you stay right behind us to watch our back. Once we get inside. There's no telling what we'll find." He turned and began to stroll down the dirt path. The others hesitated for a moment and then followed behind him.**

**The imposing structure loomed ominously in the distance. Even from a quarter of a mile away its sheer size and history dominated the landscape.**

**"Is that it?" Tommy asked, not really wanting an answer.**

**"Of course," Kenny retorted. "What else would it be?" He smiled to himself. "The old factory's been empty for years, ever since they shut it down."**

**"I don't like it," Kara said. She was nervously toying with her braids, a habit she'd been doing since she was a toddler. "It looks haunted."**

**Kenny laughed. “I’ll bet there’s a whole bunch of vampires and werewolves in there too. Tommy, did you remember the silver bullets and wooden stakes.**

**“Boys are so immature,” Jesse said to a nodding Kara. “Just like little babies.”**

**The four eventually made their way to the old abandoned building, pausing at what was left of the entranceway gates.**

**All the color in Tommy’s face drained out. “How we gonna get inside? The gates are locked.”**

**Jesse stepped in front of the boys and produced a large pin from her hair. “Leave it to a woman to get things done,” she mused. She inserted the pin into the padlock, which was mostly rust, and twisted it several times. The lock clicked open with little resistance. “Older brothers, you learn a lot from them.”**

**Kenny and Tommy looked at each other in disbelief. They nudged the gate open and gazed at their strange destination.**

**“You go first,” Kenny said nervously to Tommy. “I’ll cover your**

**back." His usual cool demeanor was obviously compromised by fear.**

**"I…I don't think so," Tommy replied. "Besides, you're the one who wanted to come here so bad." He gestured for his friend to enter.**

**Kenny shot him a hard stare and stomped through the gates. "Fine, follow me," he commanded.**

**Thick weeds choked nearly every square inch of ground and hindered their steps. A light but steady wind was filtering in from the east as gray clouds blotted out any chance of sunshine or blue sky. Leaves from overhead flitted about every which way as the trees gently swayed back and forth in the wind as if in sorrow for their lost decorations.**

**The front door was heavily coated in rust and dirt but to the amazement of them all opened surprisingly easily considering the length of its neglect. It creaked open, filling the air with a terrible noise. Kenny peered inside for a moment and then entered slowly.**

**Inside, the darkness was as solid as a brick wall. It seemed to move with the breeze outside, almost as if it had a mind of its own. It allowed the investigators to**

**enter but promised no sanctuary. Kenny produced a small, thin flashlight, which was so tiny it barely was able to slice into the darkness.**

**"Remind me again why we're here." Tommy asked through clenched teeth. He felt cold, too cold considering the temperature outside. He would've guessed it was somewhere near sixty degrees or so and yet inside the building it couldn't have been more than forty or forty-five. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, sure enough, he was able to see his breath. He lit the candle he'd taken from his mother's collection, hoping that she wouldn't miss it.**

**"Come on you guys, keep up!" Kenny shouted from up around a corner. The girls looked at each other. They could see the beam of light from Kenny's flashlight dancing around in the darkness up ahead but were becoming increasingly unwary of continuing onward. How he had managed to move so far ahead of them they weren't sure.**

**"What are you guys waiting for? What's taking you so long? Come on!"**

**Tommy, Kara and Jesse continued to make their way through the gloomy**

**and damp corridors, trying in vain to follow Kenny's voice and regretting tier decision to explore the old factory building. The darkness was still suffocating, refusing to reveal what lay within its embrace.**

**"We should've brought more flashlights," Kara complained. "How we supposed to see anything?"**

**"Hey guys," Kenny shouted. "There's some light in some of the upstairs rooms. Must be open windows or something. Come on, I'm right in front of the staircase now."**

**The cold, dank floor slammed into Tommy's palms as he crashed to the ground.**

**"You all right?" the girls asked while trying to locate exactly where he was.**

**"Yeah I'm fine. Just tripped over something." He felt so embarrassed. "You girls better watch your step."**

**They helped him to his feet and continued on their way. Behind them, hidden by the darkness, lay a small body wearing new Nike tennis shoes. The bright blue leather had been scuffed when someone had stumbled over them. And up**

**ahead of them by the stairs, also hidden by the darkness, the demon smiled.**

# THINGS AREN'T ALWAYS WHAT THEY SEEM

**Jennifer watched in disbelief as the mangled remains of the spider she'd crushed five minutes earlier lazily floated to the surface yet again. She hated spiders. Big ones, hairy ones, yellow ones, black ones, it didn't matter which species or where she encountered them, they terrified her without exception.**

**A cold chill crept down her back as she flashed back to distant, unpleasant memories, which she struggled with regularity to suppress.**

**The wolf spider glared at her with its multiple eyes from her chest where it sat menacingly. She still remembered its tiny face, completely void of emotion, as if pondering how to digest prey so much larger than itself.**

**She thought of the time she nearly swallowed the dull yellowish house spider that had secretly scurried onto her plate and lodged itself between the potatoes and the corn. The fear she had then remained undiluted by time.**

**The revulsion towards spiders of all kinds festered and grew in her like a cancer.**
**And yet she felt foolish, even childish, about her phobia. Here she was, a grown woman of thirty-six terrified of an animal no bigger than a penny, and probably weighing less than one too. Being single didn't help. Not having a man around the house to take care of small but unpleasant duties, such as crushing spiders, did have its drawbacks. So over time she was forced to handle things by herself regardless of how much she disliked them.**

**She looked down into the toilet bowl. It still floated about, oblivious to the distress it was causing. She reassured herself that it was undoubtedly dead, crumpled into a tiny, lifeless ball, but the fact did little to ease her mind.**

**Why wasn't it going down? Why did it merely move back and forth in its cold, watery grave? She wondered if maybe there was something wrong with the toilet itself. Of course not! It was brand new, only two days old. One hundred and seventy- five dollars new. The plumber who installed it was rather**

**odd though. He couldn't have weighed more than ninety pounds and his teeth, the four he did have, were several shades of brown. His nose put Pinocchio to shame and his eyes reminded her vaguely of an iguana's, bulging and always moving. But his price was good compared to the other prices she got and he was in and out of her front door in less than an hour.**

**She decided to flush one more time to see if the arachnid would finally swirl down to oblivion. The wasting of the water would undoubtedly bother her to a small extent but what else was she to do? She didn't want to call the plumber back for such a trivial matter nor did she wish to embarrass herself by calling her father or brother or anyone else for that matter.**

**She watched again as the water smoothly flowed down into the small void of the toilet leaving in its wake the waterlogged remains of the spider.**

**"This is ridiculous," she shouted to the empty room. "What is going on here?"**

**The spider slowly floated back and forth in its watery grave. Its legs were**

**curling up under its small body, resembling a tiny umbrella.**

**Turning around, Jennifer flipped off the bathroom light and walked briskly into the kitchen. She was just going to ignore it. It wasn't in her nature to turn her back on problems but this was an exception. Besides, what more could she possibly do? The thought of fishing the creepy little thing out definitely was not an option and flushing the toilet again obviously would not work. But there was one small fact that she hadn't taken into consideration…eventually she would have to use the toilet.**

**This unpleasant scenario played itself out in her mind several different ways, each as bad as the one before. She finally conceded that she would have to dispose of the spider one way or another.**

**Strainer in hand, she slowly forced herself to go into the bathroom to confront her fears. It was still there, somewhat bloated now by the water, which made it look even bigger than before. She steadied her hand as best she could and took a deep breath.**

**The spider eventually settled into the mesh, glistening grotesquely in the**

**light. Jennifer pinched her nose and slowly turned. The trashcan in the kitchen seemed a mile away. Carefully, she took one step, then another and yet another, holding her breath as drops of water sprinkled on the hardwood floor. She felt a great rush of relief when she finally tossed the beige, plastic strainer into the trashcan. It wasn't like her to throw out a perfectly good strainer but she could not bear to touch it again after it had the spider in it.**

**A feeling of triumph came over her. She had done it! She had managed to face her fears and defeat them! And now she could relax for the remainder of the day confident in her strength. She washed her hands thoroughly, hoping to remove any residual traces of the spider. Then she poured herself a glass of orange juice and began to walk into the family room to watch some television.**

**The shards of glass sliced into her feet and ankles as the acidic juice burned the cuts. Now she understood. Now she knew why the spider would not flush down the toilet. Now she comprehended everything, although she wished she didn't. It would have been easier that**

**way. Somehow less painful, less impossible.**

**The thing sloshed noisily down the hallway smashing various sized tentacles into the walls. It completely blocked her path to the front door and somehow she knew that it was aware of it.**

**She stood frozen in terror as it lumbered towards her rapidly. It was very, very hungry and was not about to let prey her size get away. She looked past the thing into the bathroom on its left. Inside the room she was able to confirm what she already knew…a large, empty space greeted her eyes marked only by a four-inch wide hole rimmed with a plastic flange.**

**The thing shot out a tendril with lightning speed. It began to mechanically draw her to it as if she were hooked on a fishing line. She knew what it would do with her; apparently it did not like the taste of spiders.**

# MANY MIDNIGHTS

**With every step, Adam knew he moved closer to his destiny. He looked down at the sidewalk, broken and cracked from countless years of exposure to the elements and noticed that each slab of cement seemed to wear its decay proudly as if to boast of its longevity and experience. The jagged seams ran in every direction possible, frequently overlapping one another. The depth and width of the cracks varied as greatly as the lengths and nearly all sported tangled and grotesque tufts of weeds and dead clumps of grass matter in them. Various insects scuttled back and forth on the sidewalk on their meaningless and hurried tasks, moving silently between pebbles and chunks of dirt.**

**Adam was careful not to step on any of the cracks. He feared that he looked foolish bypassing all of the broken areas, but his superstition about such things usually commanded his actions.**

**He bit his lip and clenched his fists. The fear was starting to affect him,**

**attempting to paralyze his legs and numb his mind into turning back. He fought the feeling with all his might but being somewhat of a small person who never did possess an abundance of self-confidence or strength, he felt the fear gradually winning over his mind as well as his body.**

**He readily admitted to himself that where he was heading was enough to frighten any person, large or small, into retreating back the way they came, but he forced himself to move along driven by the one part of him that almost always overrode all other aspects of his personality…curiosity.**

**He had always been a curious person. Curious about science, religion, nature and everything in between. He often mused to himself that he would be a giant in any of those fields due to his desire to learn, but he also fully realized his limitations, which prohibited him from reaching any great heights in the aforementioned areas.**

**However, he was generally at peace with his place in the world. One need not prove their self to the rest of the world to**

**achieve great things was a philosophy that he lived by and firmly believed in.**

**The sun was merging fast with the horizon. Its remaining light illuminated only a fraction of the landscape, leaving in its wake the inevitable approach of night. Overhead, dark pillows of clouds were gathering, adding to the ominous scene and threatening rain at any moment. The sidewalk hindered Adam's every step positioning chunks of dirt and concrete at nearly every spot as if challenging anyone to tread on it without difficulty.**

**Adam could see the house clearly now; it looked exactly the same way he remembered. He looked it over, making irrelevant mental notes as he did so. He noted the sagging roof and windows coated with dirt and observed the front porch beams, warped and twisted like the rotting teeth on a witch's face. He saw the garage squatting obscenely off to the side of the house as if it were a sidekick to the neighborhood bully. The building, as a whole, had a sinister disposition to it, taunting anyone foolish enough to venture onto its grounds.**

**But the nightmares he had been suffering from forced him to dispel any notion of turning back. They were getting progressively worse and he knew that somehow the house was connected with them.**

**The clouds began to release a heavy drizzle, just enough to nudge Adam to seek shelter in the house, although he still hesitated to do so. In his pocket he clenched a small and yellowed photograph. He'd carried it with him for years, not being sure why, except for the feeling that it would reveal its purpose to him one day. In it a small boy was sitting on a front porch in an aged rocking chair. On his lap sat a thin gray cat which was whiling away time as cats do so well. He remembered that cat. Its name was Mickey and it had been his best friend through many lonely times. He remembered how he cried when Mickey had died. He hadn't meant to do it; it was only the innocent foolishness of a young boy bored by the neglect from his parents and lack of friends.**

**His desire for thrills had unfortunately manifested itself in a horrible way. He wore his terrible decision like an anchor, heavy and unyielding in its burden, but he also recalled the satisfaction he had felt afterwards. It was as if part of his childhood was an evil, separate entity, void of any morals or conscience.**

**Adam tucked the photograph back into his pocket and started to walk toward the house. He glanced around nervously, fully aware of any impending situations that he might encounter and confident in his ability to handle them.**

**The two front windows near the top of the house glared down at him like a shark eyeing a seal, full of stupidity and ravenous cunning. But what truly disturbed him was something in one of the windows. A heavy shadow set against the tattered and torn curtains, apparently of a young boy.**

**Adam swung his head back to the front door. He did not want to scare off whoever was in the house, although he had a gut feeling that that would not be possible. He stepped onto the front porch, wincing at the protesting boards under**

**his feet. A light suddenly appeared inside and immediately cast shadows against the windows. Adam began to hesitate, but memories of the nightmares he'd been suffering from quickly shuttled him back into action.**

**The front door creaked open for him revealing the living room. The fact that it was unlocked did not register to him until he was inside the house. He looked the room over, puzzled that no one was in sight. Did they switch the lights on and then abruptly leave? And if so, then why?**

**He glanced to his right, down the hallway and into the kitchen, poorly lit by moonlight and showing only vague silhouettes of what it contained.**

**It was as empty as the front room. Old utensils lay scattered across the dusty countertop and antique appliances huddled in every corner. Cobwebs dangled in the air from long dead spiders and a clock, its hands frozen in time, filled a small niche on a far wall. The memories he had there flooded his mind. The times his mother had cooked his favorite meal, vegetable beef soup, and served it to him on a giant stainless steel**

**tray. The time he helped paint the pantry and wound up getting more paint on himself than the walls. The time Mickey had gotten into the garbage and dragged out the remains of a fish dinner. He was caught red handed trying to clean up the mess.**

**He suppressed a laugh as he walked over to the window above the sink. It afforded a perfect view of the backyard. Adam gazed through the foggy glass and back into his childhood. He saw a small boy galloping happily around the yard tossing a baseball in the air. He saw his mother calling out to the boy about his soup being ready. He watched Mickey gracefully meandering along the perimeter of the yard, sniffing at various intervals and watching overhead for imaginary predators.**

**And then something happened that sent a cold chill down Adam's spine…Mickey looked directly at him. The cat tilted its furry head to one side as if it were observing its former owner. It bared its tiny, razor sharp teeth at him and hissed loudly. The impossibility of what he had just witnessed hardly had time to register before Mickey vanished.**

**The prospect of seeing ghosts, much less malevolent feline ones, did not appeal to Adam in the least. His sanity was trying to betray him, attempting to manipulate his thoughts and beliefs to its liking. But he would not bow to its attack. He concluded that he was merely imagining things.**

**The noise from the upstairs, a thick heavy sound reminiscent of an oversize man plodding back and forth, jolted him back to reality. Should he continue to investigate? Or should he exit the house and learn to live with the nightmares? His curiosity demanded that he continue and he felt powerless to deny it.**

**The stairs ascended up towards the darkness of the upper level of the house. Each one offered its platform to his feet, an invitation to the mysteries of the strange noises up above and all they represented.**

**As he stepped on the stairs the sounds suddenly reverted to moans and incoherent whispers. Fear was now confronting his curiosity and challenging it head on. He wished he had brought some form of weapon, although he had a**

**hunch that those types of tools would do no good in a place like this.**

**When he reached the top of the staircase, an unmistakable aura of despair and evil overtook him, filling his mind with hopelessness and corrupting even his most distant and vague memories. It took every ounce of strength he had to overcome it and begin to advance towards the door that stood at the end of the hallway. He feared the door, or what lay beyond it, and he found himself shuffling towards it rather slowly. Thin slices of light framed it on all sides, confirming the fact that someone…or something, was inside the room. Quick scans of his childhood only revealed the distant memory of which room it was…his old bedroom. With the reassurance of that fact as ammunition, he felt newfound courage to open the door.**

**The light temporarily blinded him but quickly subsided to a sterile white glow similar to the waiting room in a hospital. He searched the room from wall to wall but found only periodic shadows cast from a bright moon hanging outside of the window.**

**“Many midnights have passed since you’ve been here,” the familiar voice said from behind him.**

**Its cold tone wrapped itself around Adam’s spine. With his heart in his throat, he turned to confront the voice well aware of the face it belonged to. The ghostly form of the small boy stood in the doorway.**

**“Yes I know,” Adam said and waited for the response. The figure cast a knowing glance at him. It let a chilling smile escape and gestured towards the window on the far side of the room. Outside of it was his old backyard framed by withered trees and shrubs; it offered the same view as the window in the kitchen, which was directly below it.**

**He gazed into the yard. Unlike before, there was nothing there, only patches of faded green and brown grass with an aged rusty chain link fence encompassing it.**

**And then an unexpected and frightening scene caught his eye. In the far corner, near the old tool shed that his dad and uncle had built, was a small wooden cross. The carvings on it were too**

**small to read but he instantly recognized it as Mickey's grave.**

**Adam began to sweat when the mud encrusted paw shot out of the ground, knocking over the tombstone that he had constructed so many years earlier to mark his pet's final resting place. A small head, deformed by decay, emerged immediately after. It was more bone than flesh or fur and hollow black voids were all that remained of its eyes, giving it a particularly frightening visage. It flung its head up to where Adam was standing and bared its rotting fangs. An ear splitting shriek accompanied its gaze sending Adam into the outer boundaries of insanity.**

**He stumbled backward and crashed to the floor, but quickly got to his feet and ran for the door. It hardly surprised him that the apparition was gone and the door was locked tight. Behind him the sounds of wood splintering filled the room. He rushed back to the window and froze in terror at the sight. The grave was completely ripped open and black muddy paw prints led away from it and up to the**

**house. He looked down, although his sanity begged him not to.**

**There, approximately ten feet below the window were the remains of Mickey, clawing its way up to the room. What was left of its face was twisting in a malevolent display of evil and hatred for its former owner. It had forced Adam's conscience to help it and reveled in the fact that now, after many midnights had passed, its retribution was finally at hand.**

# TO KEEP SOMETHING IN

**Dylan sat quietly in the rear seat of his father's Oldsmobile. The car hummed a monotonous drone as an endless sea of corn stalks, trees and unevenly dispersed foliage flew past the windows. It was another trip to Grandpa's cottage. To Dylan's parents, it meant visiting, escape from work and relaxation. But to Dylan it meant boredom and being forcibly subjected to his father's oldies radio station.**

**"How much further?" Dylan asked, fully aware that they'd been on the road only an hour or so.**

**"Oh, about forty-five more minutes kiddo," his Dad replied as his head bobbed from side to side with a song directly from Franklin Roosevelt's term.**

**Dylan nodded in silence, his enthusiasm consistently waning as the miles passed. Eventually, he decided to study the passing landscape. Old barns housing relics of ancient farm equipment, decimated automobiles strewn around cluttered houses, ragged looking cows grazing mindlessly in arid fields.**

**"Honey, did you remember your fishing equipment? You know Grandpa will want to**

**take you fishing." Dylan mumbled something of a yes as he continued his survey of the landscape. He noticed small ponds, some bordering on being lakes, sitting silently amid the fields. He noticed how the sun reflected off the metal decking on top of several rusted barns. And then his attention turned toward the fences. Dozens of them. Ancient forgotten things held together mostly by rust. His eyes roamed over the neglected structures.**

**Who put them up he wondered. Some senile old farmers or maybe long dead city workmen. There would be no way to find out for sure however so Dylan resigned himself to the fact and became content to merely gaze at the old boundaries as they went past his window.**

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**"Hey there, kiddo," Grandpa wheezed. "How's my boy's boy?" Dylan hated being called that. Made him sound even smaller than he already was. "Hi Grandpa."**

**"Ready for some fishin?"**

**Dylan's Dad shot his grandpa a sharp look which he promptly ignored. "Dad, let us unpack first."**

**"Nonsense. You're only here for the weekend. Hafta squeeze in as much fun as possible." Yeah, that was Grandpa, full of energy, even at seventy.**

**The boat rocked when Dylan stepped on board. Being somewhat wary of boats since he nearly fell off one two summers ago, he moved carefully.**

**"Come on Dylan, my boy. It's okay, your doin' fine." Grandpa's withered and slightly yellowed hand reached out. It was going to be the two of them. Dad couldn't come because Mom had him repairing the front deck, which had developed a slant and was in need of additional supports.**

**"Grandpa," Dylan said when they had settled in at one of Grandpa's favorite spots. "What's the name of this lake?"**

**Grandpa laughed. Ain't no lake, my boy, it's a pond. Name's Sufferet. Sufferet Pond. Named after Capt. Ian Sufferet."**

**Dylan felt compelled to pursue the subject. "Who was he?"**

**Taking off his glasses, he responded. "He was commanding officer of the Fourth Infantry Division during the Civil War."**

**Not noticing the fish nibbling at his line, Dylan exclaimed, "Wow! The Civil War! What were army men doing up here?"**

**"Won't find it in any history books, or on that there History Channel, but…. I'll tell ya something if ya promise not to tell your parents I told ya." Dylan nodded vigorously.**

**"Sometime towards the end of the Civil War, this area was infiltrated by a small band of Confederate soldiers. There were around ten of them. They somehow managed to slip past the lines before anyone knew the wiser." Noticing he had his grandson hanging on his every word, he heightened the suspense.**

**"You ask me," he whispered, leaning in even closer to Dylan, "they came to this area for a special purpose…witchcraft." Dylan's eyes expanded. "Yep, witchcraft. Or magic, or voodoo, or whatever you want to call it. They knew they were losing the war. Regular fighting wouldn't do the trick anymore." He leaned in even closer. "They had to resort to different methods…magic methods."**

**Dylan set down his pole. Suddenly he wasn't interested in fishing. "You mean they were going to use magic to win the war?"**

**"You bet."**

**"But how? Did they have a spell book or crystal ball or something?"**

**"Don't really know for sure. All we really know is that they managed to do some of their handiwork before they were discovered."**

**He let a wry smile escape. “It was Sufferet’s men who found them. Captured all ten of them.”**

**Dylan found himself sweating despite the brisk wind. “What happened to them?”**

**“They were arrested and hung for treason.” Laying down his pole, he continued.**

**“Not a one of them said a word, though. Not a peep.” Then he reposed himself and waited for his grandson’s response.**

**“Where did this happen?”Dylan asked.**

**“About a half-mile from here.” His face took on a sullen look. “But that’s not the end of the story. A few days later, sentry men started hearing strange noises in the fields. Really strange noises. Noises that sounded like teeth chattering.”**

**“Teeth chattering?”**

**“Yep, that’s right. Sufferet’s men reported the noises and he, too, heard them. Sent shivers down his spine it did. He sent four men in to investigate that very night.”**

**“What did they find?”Dylan asked in a tense voice.**

**“Never came back.” His blank expression spoke volumes. “And queer thing, though, is that a storm came up out of nowhere and forced the men to wait till morning to do a search.”**

**“Did they find them?”**

**"Nope. Not a one. Searched everywhere, too." He quietly picked up his pole and resumed his fishing.**

**"What did they do?"**

**Pretending to fumble with his bait box, he looked out at the serene view.**

**"Well, Sufferet ordered his men to build fences. Why he did this, we don't know. Some say he went back into those very fields the next night. Came back white as a sheet. It was after that that he put up the fences."**

**Dylan nodded. "Are those the fences that I seen coming up here?"**

**"The very same. Can see 'em all along the road. Old looking things, only held together by rust and wire. They keep whatever's out there in check."**

**With his heart in his throat, Dylan forced himself to ask, "keep what in check?"**

**"Whatever those men conjured up with their magic."**

**"But how could old fences keep monsters and demons away?"**

**"Don't have to look nice to work."**

**A fish interrupted the conversation. But just as abruptly, it broke free of the line. Dylan's grandfather knew he had told the boy too much, but he couldn't stop now, not when he was so close to the end.**

**"Went out in those fields myself a couple of times. Course it was daylight out. Didn't see a thing." Then the old man looked his grandson straight in the eye. "Don't know if those fences are to keep people out…or to keep something in."**

**Dylan was doing his best to remain strong. He never was one to suffer from nightmares, but he was sure that this story would really test him.**

**"Your folks know about it. Why do you think you never come or leave from here at night?"**

**Dylan's fear must have shown through because his grandfather then added, "But don't you worry none, boy. I've been living here for the better part of fifty years. Never had a problem. When you're faced with something that scares you, best thing to do is learn all about it. Then you can take steps to remedy the situation."**

**The remainder of the fishing trip was done in relative silence. Occasional attempts at conversation fell through. The family tree, the latest baseball scores, the weather, all wound up empty. Dylan felt somewhat uncomfortable. Fear was gnawing at his gut. It took every ounce of strength he had to keep the story out of**

**his mind. He succeeded somewhat…or at least until that night.**

**If his parents had known the story, why hadn't they told him? How could they keep coming up here if any of it were true? And how could he sleep at night now knowing that whatever's out there is…is…awake. However, it could have been just a story. Legends generally strayed from reality. But most had at least a basis of truth to them. He finally decided to confront his parents.**

**"Mom, Dad, can I talk to you for a minute?"**

**"Sure, what's up, kiddo?" Mom peered out from her magazine.**

**"Grandpa told me about the fences. Is it true? " He figured it would be best to go straight to the point. His parents exchanged nervous glances. It was obvious they knew something.**

**"Dylan," his dad said in a calm but troubled tone. "We know the story. Grandpa told it to me when I was a little boy. We don't really believe any of it however."**

**"Then why do we never come or go when it's dark outside? Why at night are we always inside?"**

**Both his mom and dad set down their reading material. This time his mom spoke.**

**"Well…we just think it's better to be safe, that's all. Now, want to play cards?" Dylan mumbled no as he sauntered off towards his room. Suddenly he wasn't in the mood to do much of anything.**

**"Tom, we never actually did see anything."**

**"I know, I know. But sometimes I wonder myself."**

**In his room, Dylan stared out the window. The moonlight illuminated every surface it could reach with a cool white light. Shadows hung silently within this scene, creating contrast with the moonlight. All was still.**

**How could they not have told him? Of course, his other side reasoned, there still was the possibility that none of it was true. Then they would only have been sparing…there! Something moved! He had seen it. Something out in the fields. A shadow? Trees bending to the wind? A small animal searching for food? Maybe. But nothing moved now. Regardless, he found himself scanning the fields with newfound alertness.**

**Sleep eventually overtook him. He awoke the following morning with a stiff neck and a mission that had festered in his mind until it won action. He would venture into the**

**surrounding fields after breakfast. After all, it would be daylight.**

**"Can I go exploring after breakfast?" He caught a raised eyebrow from his Grandfather.**

**"Why would you want to do that?" his Dad asked between mouthfuls of pancakes.**

**"Uh…just wanna see some nature." He winced at his pathetic answer. How he got that one past them he couldn't figure out, but there were other things on his mind now. Such as finding out if there was any truth to the story. But when it came time to cross the boundary fence into the fields, he found himself hesitating to the point of backing out. Don't be stupid, he told himself. There's nothing there. And anyways, even if there was something, it's daytime.**

**He walked slowly at first, being hindered by the knee-high grass. But he soon progressed to a steady stride. Where he was going and what he was looking for, he did not know, but he was certain he would know when he found anything.**

**Minutes passed into hours with Dylan hardly realizing it. The trees gently swayed, directed by the wind and the Sun, which earlier had seemed so friendly, and which now appeared to have a sinister look to it. Imagination again? Perhaps, but worry still wormed its way into his mind. His stomach**

**grumbling interrupted his thoughts. He was growing weary of this venture, and not knowing exactly where he was didn't help either. He decided to turn back, but the grass slowed his every step. Feeling anxiety creeping in, he scanned the horizon for a familiar sight, but nothing appeared familiar. Just retrace his steps, that's all. That's all he needed to d o.**

**Easier said than done though for there were no earlier steps to be seen. Only high grass which slung itself mindlessly against his legs. And worse still was that the daylight was fading fast. He estimated that he had only about an hour of it left. This despite the fact that he had breakfast only a few short hours ago. If he were out here after dark….he shuddered at the mere thought of it.**

**He felt the night air seeping in around him and with it a cold chill. He also felt something else, something…evil. It was strengthening its hold on the night around him. He made his legs move as fast as they could despite the ache. But soon his body demanded a rest. Dylan panted heavily as he fought the urge to sit down. He could see Grandpa's house in the distance now, which made it even harder to take a break. He started running towards the house. It steadily grew larger as he drew nearer to it. Relief washed over him. But it was**

**short- lived for behind him he heard the noises. Strange noises. Noises similar to teeth chattering. The realization that his grandfather's story was true struck him like a bolt of lightning. He ran. And this time fatigue would be battled by his desire to live. A desire to get away from whatever was behind him.**

**"Dylan? Dylan, is that you?" It was his mom. She was waiting for him by the house. "He's here," she shouted to his dad, who was coming out the front door.**

**"Dylan? Is that you, son? Come on, you can make it!"**

**Dylan's legs were burning now. And worse still, the noises were gaining on him. He could hear them closing in behind. Fifty more feet and they…it…would overtake him. But he was nearing the property fence to the house. His dad was jumping over the fence to get to him. Dylan dared not look behind him. But he felt the unmistakable feeling that whatever was there, was on the verge of catching him.**

**"Oh, my dear God!" he heard his mom scream. "Run, Dylan, run!"**

**He reached his dad and together they leaped over the fence. The noises abruptly stopped and all was silent. Being smothered by his parents never felt so good. Dylan's Grandpa**

**stood by quietly. His eyes reflected the same disbelief as his son's and daughter-in-law's. "Well, I'll be," he mumbled. "I'll be."**

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**Dylan hardly said a word in the car. He stared out the window with a blank expression while his parents talked under the constant music from the radio. He feared for his grandfather's safety and he feared even more the fact that he had never seen what was in those fields that night. How could he ever face and deal with it if he never actually saw it?**

**"Why can't Grandpa come live with us?"**

**Your grandfather has lived up there for over fifty years. Nothing's going to make him move, especially at his age."**

**"But it's not safe!" Dylan interjected.**

**"Don't worry," his dad said in a reassuring tone. "Grandpa said he was going to make some repairs first thing. Said he knew exactly what to do to make it safe."**

**The words did little to ease Dylan's mind, but what could he do? He settled for making his parents promise to call Grandpa every day. He had to be sure that nothing was going to happen.**

*  *  *  *

**They never heard from Grandpa again after that day. Not a trace of him was found. No blood. No signs of forced entry or struggle. No body. Nothing…except for a few tools out by one of the fences in the backyard. The repairs had apparently been completed. Several posts had been replaced and new wire had been fastened securely throughout the fences.**

**Had he done the repairs at night? Dylan doubted it. He wouldn't have been that foolish. But how then could something have happened to him? If it had been during the daylight, he should have been safe. Unless, and the thought made Dylan shudder, that whatever was in those fields didn't need the cloak of night any longer. Or perhaps the fences could no longer contain it.**

**But he had to get some sleep now. He had to get up extra early tomorrow to help with the fences. His dad wanted to get an early start because he wasn't sure how much they would have to put up. Apparently, he knew what to do to make the fences strong. Dylan could only pray that they would work.**

# SILENCE IS GOLDEN

**Jack winced when the latch on the front door clicked back into place behind him. Normally it was a minimal sound so common and irrelevant that one would hardly even notice it. But in Jack's case it was the equivalent of nails on a chalkboard or the high-pitched whine of a dentists' drill.**

**Noise is the last thing he wanted. Silence was golden, it was the most formable weapon a thief could possess and Jack had spent years perfecting it during his numerous jobs.**

**The stretch in Brooken Penitentiary that he had just completed taught him the value of such a tool as silence. Privacy was difficult to come by in prison and he had been forced to share his cell with two other inmates. One was the executive type, the type who wore three piece suits and silk ties everyday.**

**His name was Plasky and he was a real complainer. He moaned constantly about the bad deal his lawyer had gotten him. He said he never embezzled any money and always blamed his ex-wife for**

**framing him. Jack knew better though. One thing he had learned was that the ones who say their innocent are usually guilty.**

**The second guy was a real tough one. He stood well over six feet tall and had muscles like a bodybuilder. His deep blonde hair contrasted sharply with his piercing brown eyes, one of which slanted to his left giving him a naturally malicious look.**

**Leon was his name but he preferred to be called Sam. Jack never learned his last name or his age or where he came from or anything else about him except that he was an exceptional teacher.**

**He taught Jack all the fine points of robbery. How to pick locks, how to case a house, when to break in and even the best equipment to use. Jack smiled to himself as he recalled the lessons Mr. Sam Bodybuilder had bestowed upon him. He used every one many times and for that he was very grateful.**

**By far the most important lesson he had learned from Sam was silence. Sam had told him it was the single most important tool a thief could possess. Without it the possibilities of being caught were endless. Anyone within**

**earshot could have their suspicion aroused and call the authorities or even confront the robber themselves.**

**At first, Jack brushed off the advice assuming that every thief would try to be as quiet as possible. But Sam persisted in driving the point home and revealed several unique methods in achieving near perfect silence when entering a potential job.**

**He explained the origins of an ancient and relatively unknown race of tribesmen called the Irragotti who worshiped many deities and were said to have mastered the art of complete silence. He went on to say that he used to be an amateur archeologist and he had uncovered many artifacts from the Irragotti including a talisman that he claimed linked the soul of the possessor directly to the gods they worshiped. It was small, no larger than a pocket watch, but its structure was completely unsurpassed in its unique brilliance. A combination of gold and crystal set in a design that incorporated dozens of known and unknown shapes and textures. At its center was a large red gemstone, not a ruby but some type of semi transparent**

**stone that gleamed brightly, even in darkness.**

**A sharp chill ran up Jack's spine when he recalled Sam telling him about one of the gods in particular. Its name was Sthuth and it was more of an immortal assassin than a god. Sam had said that it was the most feared of the pantheon and its visage was far too terrible for any sane man to comprehend. It was obsessed with the talisman and any who held it. The Irragotti believed that to hold the artifact was the pinnacle of courage and required bravery beyond measure for Sthuth would eventually track down the holder and devour their bodies and their souls. It would then release the talisman for another to find it and be tracked down as well.**

**When Jack had asked what Sthuth actually looked like Sam avoided the question and laid down in his cot. Jack could see he was pale and shaken and decided not to pursue it any further. But before Jack could lie down in his own bed Sam had startled him with one more piece of information. His thin mouth tightened and his brown eyes narrowed which gave him an even more sinister look.**

**"You must be silent," he said under his breath. "It is the only way to avoid its attention. It is why the Irragotti practiced silence…but they were wiped out anyway."**

**Although he did not believe any of it Jack still remembered the words well. They fastened themselves in his mind and had remained there ever since like a watchdog looking over its masters' possessions.**

**He turned his attention back to the house. He clicked on a small flashlight he had very slowly fully aware of the noise it made. Cursing himself for not buying, or stealing, a less cumbersome model he moved the thin beam of light into the room in front of him. Pride filled his mind.**

**The room was full of shadows each with its own shape and to a more abstract degree, personality. Jack looked around carefully. He had seen the house many times from the outside but obviously had never been inside. It appeared much larger than he thought it would. Expensive imported furniture, elegant surrealistic paintings, plush carpet accented with Persian rugs and stylish and bold wallpaper and window dressings**

**filled every square inch of the room. Truly a man of wealth and taste lived here. But Jack did not care about the taste; it was only the wealth that he was interested in.**

**He began his search of the room. Valuables were in every corner. Silver table settings lay across a polished Mahogany dining room table big enough to play a football game on. A glittering crystal chandelier hung ominously over the table and reflected Jack's beam of light in its beautiful shards. There was an enormous china cabinet filled with delicate china and accessories that appeared as if never used. And opposite that on the far wall was a custom made wine rack that stretched from floor to ceiling. Literally hundreds of multi-colored bottles of various shapes and sizes decorated its slots. Jack found himself mesmerized by the furnishings and had to snap himself back to attention to the job at hand.**

**Where should he start? So many objects warranted his attention and time was undoubtedly limited. He decided to investigate the upstairs despite the time constraints. Most people kept more intimate valuables, such as jewelry, in**

**their bedrooms, not to mention the possibility of a safe. He started to make his way, quietly, towards the stairway.**

**And then he heard the sound.**

**It was small, similar to the tapping on a computer keyboard. Jack froze in his tracks. Despite it being very low and nearly inaudible it was still cause for great concern. Listening closely, he ascertained that it was coming from the hallway, which apparently led to the kitchen area. Jack leaned forward and strained to focus on the noise that was becoming more and more indistinct. He found himself grasping the small revolver he periodically carried on jobs. Its cold steel soothed his nerves and gave him a jolt of courage. With its barrel in front of him he slowly and cautiously tred towards the kitchen.**

**The hallway was long and very dark. A faint ray of moonlight snaked its way through a small window above the sink, vainly illuminating a narrow strip of wall on Jack's left. His index finger was tightening its grip on the trigger of the gun. He had to be careful and not squeeze off a round prematurely. That would surely blow his cover. But what could be**

**making those sounds? As far as he could tell he was alone in the house.**

**An endless array of culprits danced across his imagination. The homeowner? The Police? The watchdog? He didn't care for any of the possibilities.**

**He swept his flashlight back and forth several times but it revealed no clues as to the origin of the noises, only darkness and shadowy silhouettes greeted him.**

**He had to make a decision, the job or jail, or possibly even his life. Having heard many tales of fellow thieves mowed down by over zealous homeowners, including one guy who stumbled into a room full of Pit Bulls, prompted him to abandon the job. Tempting fate was not in his character and he was not afraid to admit to himself that he did not want to go back to jail.**

**Still holding the revolver tightly in his hand he slowly began to back out of the hallway. The strange noises had stopped but their memory still hung heavy in his mind. Many thoughts raced through his mind the foremost one being what was in the house with him.**

**And then he stopped in his tracks again. The noises had started up**

**again…directly behind him. He whirled around quickly, confident in his gun's power… but there was nothing there. Only a dimly lit room accented heavily by shadows.**

**Now he was truly scared. His father, a terrible brute of a man, had managed to impart one useful piece of advice to his one and only son between beatings…never lie to yourself. His father had always known he was a bad excuse for a parent, a husband, even a man, but at least he admitted it to himself and even, in some distorted way, accepted it. And Jack had always used the same logic for himself. He knew he wasn't much of a man but as long as he accepted it that would be enough reason he would ever need to continue in his criminal ways.**

**Memories of his mother having her Bridge nights with Aunt Sophie and Aunt Claire, his Terrier Poodle Moppy, named for the tufts of hair that lay atop its head giving it a look not unlike a damp mop. And even the immense feeling of satisfaction he had when he aced a final exam in ninth grade Chemistry…without cheating. These and so many more, some clear and some vague, flitted through**

**Jack's mind in smooth and rapid succession.**

**Had he wasted his life? Had he succumbed to vice and corruption instead of actually accomplishing something, of creating something, of helping someone? But what was he to do? Robbery was the only thing he was ever any good at and his father, and mother for that matter, had never given him any support or encouragement to do better.**

**His thoughts were interrupted by the unusual and potentially dangerous situation he was in. The noises had stopped again but an undeniably ominous feeling still filled the room. The revolver felt cold in his hand and the flashlight was beginning to dim creating an even more terrifying predicament. Jack knew he had to get out of the house quickly. Still gripping the gun tightly he started to advance towards the front door. Its familiarity and what it represented, escape, calmed him greatly.**

**And then he seen something that he had not noticed before.**

**He felt frustrated with himself for not seeing it earlier. A thief needed to be alert and ever conscience of all around him and he knew this as well as anyone.**

**But it still had slipped past his notice, which could mean the difference between life and death.**
**The red gem at its center gleamed with priceless intensity even though the object was almost completely obscured by darkness. It was the talisman of the Irragotti!**

**Jack felt his throat go dry as he eyed the artifact. The value of such a piece would surely be enough to set him up for a life of luxury and comfort. He had to have it.**

**But the implications of Sam Bodybuilder's tale weighed on his mind. Did he really want to risk it? What if all that Sam had told him was true? What if he awoke the wrath of some long dead or slumbering menace? He doubted his pistol would be enough to protect him. But as these thoughts raced across his mind he still found himself standing in front of the object, ready to lift it from its pedestal. He had never heard of the Irragotti before Sam had told him. Perhaps it was just Sam's imagination embellishing his own exploits. Or maybe he had a mental problem causing him to believe his own tales. Regardless, Jack really did not believe a word of it. He**

**picked up the object from its base and examined it closely. It appeared just the way Sam had described it, which did send a chill down Jack's spine. The red gem at its center was flawless, probably worth thousands alone, but the undeniable feeling of hopelessness that accompanied the artifact caused Jack to replace it on its stand almost immediately. He wanted no part of it or anything it represented.**

**The noises rose up again, rearing their mysterious head as if to mock Jack into trying to figure what could be causing them. This time they seemed to be coming from the stairway. Although they were even quieter than before their malicious intent was beyond any doubt. Jack swung the flashlight and gun around, facing the steps. Another thing he had learned from dear old dad was to face your problems…even if they were unknown to you. He took a deep breath and slowly started to make his way towards the stairs.**

**When he was nearing the bottom step he stopped cold in his tracks. He gazed hypnotically at the array of pictures that hung diagonally along the stairway. There were several on the wall,**

**each depicting archeologists posing in various scenes ranging from Egypt to what he would have guessed to be the rainforests of South America. The noises had stopped again so he found himself studying the pictures somewhat closely. Part of him screamed to leave the house immediately but he could not resist the puzzles that hung in front of him.**

**One in particular caught his attention. It was the third one from the top of the stairway. In it a well -built man was proudly displaying an artifact that he had undoubtedly uncovered. His smile was wide and his skin tanned. And Jack also noticed his left eye, which slanted to his left. There was no question that the man in the picture was Mr. Sam Bodybuilder and the item he was displaying was the same object that was on the pedestal.**

**Jack quickly scanned the other pictures. They all contained Sam, usually with two or three other men of similar ilk. In some shots he was no older than twenty or so. In others he was clearly in his forties or even older. In every photo the slanting eye gave him the characteristic look that Jack had become accustomed to in the penitentiary.**

**The cold realization of the pictures stung Jack like a needle. Was this Sam's house? Was the artifact his? And why didn't he tell him that he had it? Jack knew he was in trouble. He had to get out of the house quickly and quietly. He turned back towards the front door. It stood before him, a barrier that represented both freedom and confinement. Despite the fact that the house was completely silent he knew he was not alone. He sensed there was someone, or something, in the house with him, watching him, stalking him.**

**He began to head towards the door being extremely cautious and alert of everything around him. There were no more sounds but that certainly did not mean he was safe. He still clutched the gun, alternating between thrusting it in front of him and cradling it to his chest. Every aspect of his thieving abilities would be tested if he wanted to escape and he knew it. His father's long silenced voice hung over him. It moaned its disappointment with its son, gnawing away at his sanity.**

**The front door was within his reach. Only three or four feet separated him from it. He hesitated. He did not**

**want to set the gun down but he needed to use the flashlight. The silence in the house was deafening. It seemed to envelope every object in the room. Jack thought about it for a moment then reluctantly set the flashlight on the floor. It rolled over a few times until it rested against his foot. Its beam of light rolled with it until it landed squarely on the dripping face of the thing squatting ten feet away from where Jack stood.**

**It was vague in form, almost transparent, and many of its eyes were focused eagerly on Jack.**

**There was no time to react. In a split second it lurched awkwardly towards Jack leaving a ghostly residue in its wake. Jack was able to raise his gun and get off one shot, which careened helplessly off the thing and embedded itself in the ceiling. It left nothing behind except for the gun and the flashlight.**

**The artifact gleamed brightly in its grasp as it contemplated where to deposit it next. Then it cocked its malformed head to one side and grunted a wet, guttural howl. Its mission accomplished it dispersed into an oily, foul smelling smoke, which soaked through the floor of**

**the house leaving only a greasy residue behind.**

**Back in his cell Leon smiled broadly. His master was pleased with his offer.**

**He began to lift his cot off of the ground in slow, fluid movements, flexing his biceps tightly as he did so.**

**He would only do a small workout today because he needed to conserve his energy. His master might get hungry again and call upon him.**